

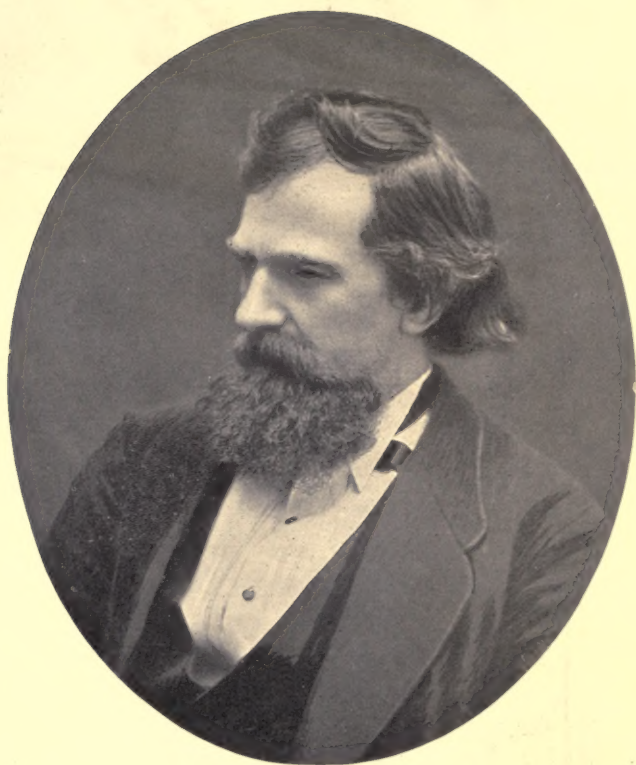




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JOSEPH SKIPSEY





JOSEPH SKIPSEY

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JOSEPH SKIPSEY

HIS LIFE AND WORK

BY THE

RT. HON. ROBERT SPENCE WATSON

WITH THREE PORTRAITS

T. FISHER UNWIN
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JOSEPH SKIPSEY

PERHAPS I should explain at the outset my object in writing the following Life of Joseph Skipsey. For forty years we were close friends, and a month seldom passed without our meeting. He was a constant guest at my house, and few events occurred to either of us which were not made known to the other. It is quite possible that the affection and esteem with which I regarded him may lead me to estimate him somewhat more highly than I ought to do, but I am not content that he should become a mere memory without giving those of his countrymen who may care to learn about him the opportunity of knowing who he was and what he did. The task which I have undertaken is not an easy one. To make a short sketch of a few pages would indeed be a light matter, and it probably would satisfy the great majority of those who wished to know anything about him, but to me it would be eminently unsatisfactory, and yet I feel that my power to reproduce in any worthy sense the man as he really was is quite inadequate. Amongst the many whom I have been so fortunate as to know who have achieved distinction in different walks of life, I do not think that I can recall one who struck me as distinguished in the same way as he was. Many have

achieved far greater distinction ; many have carried out useful and even invaluable work ; but as an independent thinker, as a man of entirely original power, as one who was capable of careful and deep thought, and, at all events, in conversation of expressing its results, he stands to me alone. All that he has ever written taken all together can only give an inadequate idea of his infinite resources, and yet he was the very reverse of a man favoured by fortune, or it would seem so to our perhaps unwise method of weighing these things. What he actually did was perhaps rarely perfect, but it all bears the impress of the man's unique personality. He was a true poet, a seer as well as a maker. Of course many makers are not poets ; no man is a true poet unless he is a maker, but, far beyond that, a seer. He must have the inward eye, he must be able to see the true meanings and relations of things. He may not have the deep poetic heart, the divine afflatus, or what you may choose to call it, and thus he may never be a great poet in any high sense. Skipsey was one of the elect who had this as the comparatively few true poets must have it. They may differ in the extent to which they have it, and in the power which they have to give body in words to their seeing. Some speak in a stammering tongue. The leaders in the undying republic of letters have insight and full voice ; not in all, but in some respects, Skipsey had both. His poems of the life which was familiar to him are unique ; they stand alone. No one else has touched them. The life of the pit which, at a distance, looks dark and gloomy and is hazardous and uncertain, has its own beauty,

and we know it when that beauty is interpreted and shown to us by Joseph Skipsey.

The true poet sings of that which is nearest and dearest to him; the life he knows, the country he knows, and the inner meaning of that life and country which are borne in upon him. Goethe has forcibly expressed this in the lines—

“Willst den Dichter du verstehen,
Musst im Dichters lande gehen.”

The true poet whom we name great has usually had things beautiful before his eyes from the earliest days. He has lived in the country, and has received his impressions of Nature from Nature herself; he has listened as time went on to the conversation of cultured people, and those surrounding him have invariably revered thought and knowledge. The grand literary relics of the speech of the foremost people of the bygone world, of the dead tongues, have lived for him; he has travelled much, and so has learnt much of men; he has seen and studied the choicest art of many peoples; has learnt much not only from nature surrounding him but from Nature's master-works in many lands; and he knows her many moods and can give the exact speech expressing the real meaning to each. The intellectual leaders of his day have been familiar in his mouth as household words. From the cradle to the grave he has been surrounded by the atmosphere which makes that sentiment in which all that the mind can acquire is as natural to him as his native air. If, with the eye of the seer, and the mind of the maker, he has been vouchsafed love and reverence, and above

all sympathy, whatever direction his art may take, whether he be a musician, painter, or poet, he will discover and interpret new worlds of mind for mankind, his limits will be wide, and his range vast and varied. But when, on the other hand, his infancy has known the pinch and squalor of dire want, his childhood has been spent in grinding and abhorrent toil; when he has grown up where vegetation is stunted and grimy, and Nature's highest efforts are neglected because of bodily fatigue; when his travels have been from unlovely villages to yet more hideous towns; when worthy books have been dribbled out to him, and the use and certainty afforded by competent teachers denied; when the great products of art are unknown, and all mental attrition has been with minds which have gone through a similar weary and stunting process; then we must expect that, if the magic strength of Nature still triumphs and a true poet should emerge, his limits must be circumscribed and his range a narrow one. It is indeed marvellous when there is any emergence at all, and when, in true and simple words which go to the heart, we listen to a poet who sings to us of the life which lies about him, its toils and pains, its joys and its dangers, its pathos, its heroism. If there be humour in him it also will out, and we learn something of the inner meaning which lies behind it all. Thus I come to write about my old friend with the most earnest desire to set him forth as he really was, to let men know what manner of a man we had amongst us, but wishing that at the same time it should be clearly understood that whilst this is my earnest desire I feel strongly the difficulty of the task.

It is not altogether easy for us to realise what a different country the land we live in was three-quarters of a century ago. That is not a long period of time, and yet, in social life, and especially in that part of it which relates to the conditions of labour, everything is changed, I have never met with a man who could carry his mind back to the Thirties and the early Forties, who did not agree that, in the time which had intervened, we had passed through a great industrial revolution and had passed through it peaceably, and that the existing state of things, though by no means ideal, was marvellously good when compared with that which his early recollection brought back to him.

In those early days of which old men can yet tell their actual experiences, the conditions of labour in Great Britain were indeed terrible in every branch of industry. There is much remaining which has to be set right. Men talk now of some two millions of the working class who are on the very margin of existence, and who rarely get sufficient for proper subsistence. But if we go back to the time of which I am speaking, it is no exaggeration to say that the entire working class were in that condition. There was no man amongst them who had the proper means of subsistence; all were on the brink of starvation. When the highest skilled labourer, with the exception of the best men in the employments requiring the greatest skill, received the magnificent wage of $3\frac{3}{4}$ d. per hour, it can readily be imagined that men of smaller skill or unskilled got very little indeed.

Combination amongst workmen, and peaceable

meetings with the object of increasing wages, were severely put down. In 1825 an Act was passed repealing all the statutes then in force against combination, although in the following year this Act was itself repealed and partially re-enacted. While Trade Unions were not legalised, a strike was held by the Judges not to be illegal, but a combination of workmen to bring about a strike was severely punished as a criminal conspiracy. Trade Unions could not enforce the payment of debts due to them. Even when their secretaries embezzled their monies the Judges held that they were not entitled to the protection of the law, as they were societies constituted for illegal purposes. The industrial war went on constantly, and some of us have heard from the men who remember the old strikes when they were children, how bitter the strife was and how great the privation which was submitted to with a courage and cheerfulness which is surprising when we remember how often the effort was a vain one. There was little public feeling upon the matter until, in 1834, six Dorchester labourers were convicted and sentenced to seven years transportation for that which was called the crime of combination. Then there was a great outburst of popular indignation, and the men were pardoned and ordered to be liberated. But they had been hastened out of the country, taken over to Sydney, quarantined for about three weeks, and then sold as slaves for £1 a head. Several of them never heard of their pardon until long years had elapsed, and some of them would never have heard of it until the expiration of their sentences if it had not been for the pure

accident that one, being employed at the Governor's own house, happened to come across an English newspaper, and so learned the truth. Perhaps the state of industrial affairs in the United Kingdom at this period is best shown by hearing what a careful and intelligent observer from another land thought about it. Frederick Engels visited the English manufacturing districts in 1844, and he found "the condition of the workmen and of their wives and children so deplorable, the rate of wages so low, health and morality so ruined, the greed of gain on the part of the manufacturers so reckless, and the state of society so indifferent," that he recorded the gloomiest predictions, and saw no possible escape but in violent revolution, which he regarded with certainty as inevitable.

Dr. Baernreither, who came to study the conditions under which our working classes lived some forty years after this, and published an important work on "English Associations of Working Men," quotes the above view, but adds "that the violent revolution never came to pass, and any one who to-day, after a lapse of forty years, examines carefully the conditions of the working classes in England, will be convinced that it never will."

The industry which affects us most in the story which I have to tell is that of coal-mining, and, in 1840, a Royal Commission was appointed upon the motion of Lord Shaftesbury (then Lord Ashley) to inquire into the employment of women and children in coal-mines, and the evidence which this Commission took was printed in a Blue Book with many illus-

trations. It was simply appalling. For fourteen and sixteen hours in the day children of seven, six, and, exceptionally, only four years of age, were doomed to labour in the dark and noisome mines. Women of all ages worked with them. When the seams of coal were narrow or low, women and children alike had to crawl on their hands and knees dragging, often through foul and fetid water, small trucks of coals to which they were fastened by girdles and chains. They were the prey of deformity and disease, and the moral ill-health of the workers was more terrible than the physical. The cruelties to which those children who were apprenticed to some of the colliers, and even those to which the wives and children of domestic slave-drivers were subjected to are too revolting to dwell upon.

The worst conditions of all, scarcely obtained in the Northern coal-field, where the employment of pitmen was one of an hereditary character. Son often followed father through many generations; and this fact is true of employer as well as of employed, so that there grew up between the two a kind of almost family relationship, and the natural interest and sympathy which are thus begotten was theirs. But still when, in 1842, Lord Ashley (afterwards Lord Shaftesbury) carried a Bill to forbid the employment of women and children in mines and collieries, the then Lord Londonderry, who was a large coal-owner, moved that it should be read that day six months. Although, happily, he could not get a seconder to his extraordinary proposition, he succeeded in considerably mutilating the Bill.

When things were probably at the worst, Joseph Skipsey was born at Percy Main on the 17th of March,

1832. He was the youngest of eight children, and he lost his father when he was only four months old. At the time there was much excitement amongst the pitmen in this district, the men were frequently out on strike, and there were systematic demands for reforms in their manner of working.

Three principal points were strongly urged, and, in the light of to-day, I do not think that any one of them appears to be unreasonable. They were—

First, that the miners should only be turned out of the houses which they held by virtue of their labour by the operation of law.

Second, that they should work eleven days a fortnight at 3s. a day, which would leave them 29s. after deductions, or a fraction more than 2s. 7d. a day.

Third, that a day's work should be reckoned at twelve hours.

But, as is found even in these days, the most reasonable demand when it becomes an object of dispute will be argued hotly and contentiously, and the manner of applying the arguments are even yet not infrequently forcible. Seventy years ago there were awkward encounters from time to time between the strikers and the police; meetings were held which the police insisted on dispersing—and this is never a very safe or wise proceeding. It is always better to let persons say all that they have to say and the worst that is in them. There is relief to the speakers and safety to all when the steam has been let off. The encounters were aggravated by the fact that many men were appointed

as special constables who were not constables in the ordinary sense, but were specially made such to protect the non-strikers. Cuthbert Skipsey, the poet's father, was an overman at Percy Main Colliery, and he had much influence with the pitmen generally. On the evening of Sunday, the 8th of July, 1832, there was an affray between some pitmen and special constables, and Cuthbert Skipsey interfered with the object of making peace. Unfortunately, a special constable, named George Weddell, misunderstood what his object was, and pushed him away and at once shot him dead with a pistol.

George Weddell was tried at the following Newcastle Assizes in August for manslaughter, and he was found guilty and was sentenced to six months' imprisonment with hard labour. Although the sentence seems to be a somewhat slight one, considering the excitement of the time and the whole facts of the case, and the not unnatural alarm of a special constable who found himself in an awkward and threatening position, the result was on the whole a satisfactory one. No one supposes there was any malice in the matter, which was the rash act of a man under great excitement and with the idea that he himself would probably be attacked. Still it was well that Justice should show that, even at such troublous times, men entrusted with the upholding of the peace should be doubly careful not themselves to transgress, and that the taking of a man's life is never to be overlooked.

It was a hard world for the poor, that into which Joseph Skipsey was born. In after-days, when he recalled his childhood and described the constant

labours and anxieties of his excellent mother, he used to wax eloquent upon the mighty change which had been wrought by the abolition of the Corn Laws. Frequently when I visited him on that which proved to be his deathbed, he spoke to me of the movement which had sprung up against Free Trade, and spoke not in anger but in sorrow. He always said that the men who were leading the adverse movement had really never understood what the condition of the working people was before the abolition of the Corn Laws, for it was impossible if they had had any practical idea of what the great mass of their fellow-countrymen had had to pass through, they should have advocated anything which might possibly bring any part of the people of this country back into such a bad condition.

Joseph Skipsey had no schooling. He went down the pit regularly when he was seven years of age, and he spent sixteen hours in the dark, from time to time pushing open a door through which the tubs of coal passed. It was a painful and a weary time, but, with rare pluck and perseverance, he succeeded in teaching himself to read, write, and cipher. At first the loneliness and the darkness considerably affected his sensitive disposition, but he managed to possess himself of printed bills, either obtaining them from small shops or from places where they were stuck up, and he got good-natured pitmen to give him the ends of their farthing dips, and, with a piece of chalk, he copied the letters on the sill, getting the names of the letters (which he had some chance knowledge of before he entered the pit) and explanations of meanings from those pitmen who were kindly disposed and who

were able and willing to help him. He was a wee child in those days, and one of his brothers used to carry him part of the way to and from the pit. In winter he never saw daylight except on Sundays. There was no cage to go down in; the boys used to cling to the chain, putting their feet into bits of rope tied for the purpose; and a dangerous business it was. Skipsey has told me that he saw one little fellow who began to lose his hold as he went up on the chain. His brother was below him and he called to him, "A'm gannen to faal, Jimmy." "Slide doon to me, hinney," his brother replied. But, when he slid, the brother could not hold him, and they fell down the deep shaft together.

When Skipsey returned home after the weary day's work was over he not infrequently heard from his good mother, "Joe, hinney, thou'll just gan out and gether a gud handful o' nettles and aa'l meyk th' a sup broth wi' breed in't." She was a good, hard-working woman, but few of the working classes in that day knew what it was to have regular meals or sufficient quantity to eat. The marvel is that any of the children grew up as strong men and women as they did.

When he was fifteen years old he had read little, but he had learned many bits of ballads from the older lads in the pits. Then an uncle who had a few books offered to lend him "Paradise Lost," and it was a revelation to him. He thought of nothing else day or night, and his enthusiasm induced his uncle to lend him other books and to present him with a copy of Lindley Murray's Grammar—an invaluable work. Even with all the reformatations and improvements which have taken place

in the English Grammar during the past seventy years I doubt if anything so good as Lindley Murray has been produced. It is very old-fashioned and more scientific ways have been invented, but no one ever mastered Lindley Murray's book without being thankful for it, and feeling that it was quite unnecessary to dive into the remoter mysteries of the more modern effusions. Skipsey made this book absolutely his own. He then borrowed Pope's translation of the "Iliad," and heard for the first time of Shakespeare's plays, of which he afterwards bought a copy when seventeen years old, saving out of his small pocket-money five shillings with which he became its happy possessor. "The book altered the aspect of the world to me," was what he afterwards stated. These books greatly stimulated his imagination, and he read and re-read them slowly and carefully, at first without understanding a great deal, but by degrees, having his difficulties cleared away from him by an aunt, who helped him much. Later on she lent him Burns's poems, and they had an extraordinary influence upon him. It is strangely interesting to think of the pit-boy growing up to manhood in difficult and uncongenial surroundings, and yet having, in the time which he could call his own, a benign influence of this kind exercised upon him, leading him into worlds far outside of anything with which he was acquainted. It must have been to him a constant blessing and boon. He was an eager and earnest student, and not one of those books left his hands until it had been worked through and through, and until many portions of it had been committed to memory. He was a great reader of the Bible—the first book he mastered when quite a child—

and so strong an influence did its simple style exercise upon him, that he set deliberately to work to learn it from beginning to end by heart. Fortunately, before he had got very far with the painful and somewhat unnecessary task, some good friend discovered what he was about and succeeded in persuading him from going any further with its commitment to memory.

There is no account of him in his early boyish days, but, from what I knew of him afterwards, I am convinced that he was not a mere bookworm, but that he would take his part in the games and sports which went on about him. He was very careful to save whatever money he possibly could, and gathered together a considerable sum, and, by the time he was twenty, he had purchased several books—Joyce's "Scientific Dialogues" and Chalmers' "Political Economy" amongst them. He became a subscriber to that valuable work, "Chambers' Information for the People," which came out in penny numbers. He also got translations of one or two of the Greek dramatists and of Homer and Virgil, and these certainly produced a considerable effect on his after-work. But I think that the translations he obtained a little later of Goethe's "Faust," and, when yet older, of Heine's poems, had the most influence of all upon him. Of the first part of "Faust" he was a constant student, and Goethe became a close friend to him and remained such through life. There were few things that he appreciated more than the setting of Goethe's and Heine's songs to music. He loved to listen to them being sung in the original, and he was able thoroughly to appreciate them and to translate them for himself into a language which he understood.

Indeed, during his last illness, when at times he was unable to read, nothing, I think, gave him greater pleasure than to listen especially to Heine's songs, which, from time to time, my daughter went specially to sing to him. It was most interesting to hear his comments and to learn the point of view which made these most precious to him.

I do not remember whose translation of "Faust" he first got hold of, but when we became acquainted, now half a century ago, I found that he had close knowledge of two or three versions, and that he knew minutely the first part of that marvellous drama, and it had as it were really entered into his life, and was to him a constant joy. I shall never forget how, on one occasion in 1870, Mr. Eirikr Magnusson was staying with me, and Skipsey turned up accidentally to dine, and was somewhat perturbed to find a stranger present. He was still and grave, and took little part in the conversation. Mr. Magnusson, on the other hand, was a brilliant conversationalist, but he happened to say something about Goethe and "Faust." He was surprised when, from the other side of the table, a deep, thoughtful voice said, "I deny that," and he at once engaged in an argument with Skipsey which was exceedingly brilliant and exceedingly amusing, but in which Skipsey held his own in a very remarkable way. In fact I am inclined to think that he knew more about Goethe and "Faust" than his antagonist. Mr. Magnusson whispered to me, "Who is this fellow?" and I told him, and said, "You must make much of him, for in half an hour's time he will be going away to the pit, which he goes down to-night." He went up at

once and took him by the arms and said, "My dear fellow, you must not continue to live here ; it is no place for you ; you must come and live in London." "Not if I can exercise any influence with him," was my reply.

I need not go further into the growth of Skipsey's reading. It continued throughout his life and became very extensive, but what I was always most struck by was the exceeding accuracy with which he read ; the way in which he made himself master of whatever he undertook, and the consequence that everything became his own and he never forgot it. One peculiarly valuable quality there was in his reading and his remarks upon that which he read ; it was genuine, it was his own. He did not read, until much later in life, criticisms of other men's work, but he formed his conclusions himself. Thus, when you got him to discuss the merits of an author, you got the views of an independent and unbiassed man of a mind of great power of thought. But "who often reads will sometimes want to write," and Skipsey was no exception to Matthew Prior's rule. He himself says, "The life of the Muses had grown with me from my infancy, and I had actually practised verse-making while I was yet a child behind my trap-door." Before I mention his early poems I must give a few facts I have been able to learn about his young life. I am indebted for them to his daughter, Mrs. Harrison, of Harraton, his eldest living child.

At first he worked at Percy Main pit, which was laid in in the year 1852, when he was twenty years old. At that time the railway mania had passed its most acute stage, but one of its results was that railways

were being laid down in many different parts of the country, and, especially in London, there were great preparations being made of stations and warehouses for the accommodation of the traffic which it could readily be seen was certain to come. Skipsey felt the not uncommon desire of a young man to see something more of the world than he had yet been able to accomplish, and he made his way to London. He was unable to afford a railway journey, which in those days was not a cheap and easy thing as it is now, and he walked most of the way, occasionally getting a lift in a carrier's cart. He got employment at the works connected with one of the large stations, and he lived at a boarding-house kept by an East Anglian lady who became his wife in the year 1854. By this time he had had sufficient of the South, and he took his wife to Coatbridge, in Scotland, where he worked as a coal-miner for six months, and then he removed to the Pemberton Collieries, near Sunderland, where he settled for a considerable time. I think that it was then that, the place of schoolmaster in one of the colliery villages falling vacant, he undertook the work for a short time, but, although he got plenty of pupils, he could not live on the remuneration he received as fees. Afterwards he returned to Northumberland, and found work at Choppington. In 1859 he left the pits and became storekeeper at Messrs. Hawks, Crawshay & Sons' works in Gateshead.

Now I must say something of his early poems. It is not quite easy to give dates to them. He first of all published a collection of them in 1859.

There are several which relate to pit life, and to

my mind they are the most valuable of anything which he wrote. He is dealing with that with which he was absolutely familiar, and the aspects which presented themselves to him were of the most poetical kind. They dealt simply with the greatest issues of life and death. Some of them show the depression which his severe and strange work brought upon him from time to time; and in them he deals with the most vivid aspects of that uncertain, hazardous, and interesting calling with which he is practically familiar. In them he speaks as only one who knows from practical experience can speak, straight from the heart to the heart. I cannot give them certainly in the order of the years in which they were written, but if we take that which deals with the beginning of pit life for the young boy, we have four simple verses which represent what Skipsey himself no doubt felt when in his early life he was first allowed to go down the pit, and which, until he left the hard and uncertain calling, he must have constantly seen. It is entitled "Mother Wept," and runs as follows :—

Mother wept, and father sighed ;
With delight aglow
Cried the lad, "To-morrow," cried,
"To the pit I go."

Up and down the place he sped—
Greeted old and young ;
Far and wide the tidings spread ;
Clapt his hands and sung.

Came his cronies ; some to gaze,
Wrapt in wonder ; some
Free with counsel ; some with praise ;
Some with envy dumb.

“ May he,” many a gossip cried,
“ Be from peril kept.”
Father hid his face and sighed,
Mother turned and wept.

Then, when the pit-lad has grown into a young man
and he is contemplating matrimony, there are the
following lines, called “ Willy to Jinny ” :—

Duskier than the clouds that lie
’Tween the coalpit and the sky,
Lo, how Willy whistles by
Right cheery from the colliree.

Duskier might the laddie be,
Save his coaxing coal-black e’e,
Nothing dark could Jinny see
A-coming from the colliree.

Those of us who have been present when the men
were leaving the pit, grimy and stained with their day’s
work, can thoroughly appreciate the full meaning of
these lines. The dusky grime, which a short time
would entirely remove, is not to be seen by the eye of
affection.

Skipsey has written many a song or a short poem to
the pit beauties, with whom he no doubt was acquainted

in his young days. As to how far they represent real persons, and how far they are creatures entirely of the imagination, I cannot say, but it is quite certain that they are absolutely founded on fact; and some of these songs are full of a cheerful, simple lilt, although they have not the merit of those I have already spoken of as entering into the absolute workaday life of the pitman. But he brings in constantly the different pit villages about him and the lads and lasses hailing from the different places which were familiar to him. I might illustrate this by "The Lad of Bebside":—

My heart is away with the lad of Bebside,
And never can I to another be tied;
Not, not to be titled a lord's wedded bride,
Could Jinny abandon the lad of Bebside.

He dances so clever, he whistles so fine,
He's flattered and wooed from the Blyth to the Tyne,
Yet spite of the proffers he meets far and wide,
I'm alone the beloved of the lad of Bebside.

He entered our door on the eve of the Fair,
And cracked with our folk in a manner so rare,
Next morning right early with spleen I was eyed
To link to the Fair with the lad of Bebside.

Last night at the dancing, 'mid scores of fine queans,
The eldest among them just out of her teens,
He chose me, and truly with pleasure and pride
I footed the jig with the lad of Bebside.

To wed me he's promised, and who can believe
A laddie like him can a lassie deceive?
The moon's on the wane—ere another be spied
I'll lie in the arms of the lad of Bebside.

In "The Collier Lad" he gives a simple picture of a pit champion, and tells of his skill at the various games which are the delight of the young men of a colliery village.

My lad he is a collier lad,
And ere the lark awakes
He's up and away to spend the day
Where daylight never breaks.
But when at last the day has pass'd,
Clean washed and cleanly clad,
He courts his Nell, who loveth well
Her handsome collier lad.

CHORUS.

There's not his match in smoky Shields;
Newcastle never had
A lad more tight, more trim, nor bright
Than is my collier lad.

Tho' doomed to labour under ground
A merry lad is he,
And when a holiday comes round
He'll spend that day in glee;
He'll tell his tale o'er a pint of ale,
And crack his joke, and bad
Must be the heart who loveth not
To hear the collier lad.

At bowling matches on the green
He ever takes the lead,
For none can swing his arm and fling
With such a pith and speed.
His bowl is seen to skim the green,
And bound as if right glad
To hear the cry of victory
Salute the collier lad.

When 'gainst the wall they play the ball,
He's never known to lag,
But up and down he gars it bound
Till all his rivals fag ;
When deftly—lo ! he strikes a blow
Which gars them all look sad,
And wonder how it came to pass,
They play'd the collier lad.

The quoits are out, the hobs are fixed,
The first round quoit he flings
Enrings the hob ; and lo ! the next
The hob again enrings.
And thus he'll play the summer day,
The theme of those who gad ;
And youngsters shrink to bet their brass
Against the collier lad.

When in the dance he doth advance
The rest all sigh to see
How he can spring and kick his heels
When they a-wearied be ;

Your one-two-three, with either knee,
He'll beat, and then, glee-mad,
A heel-o'er-head leap crowns the dance
Danced by the collier lad.

Besides a will and pith and skill
My laddie owns a heart
That never once would suffer him
To act a cruel part;
That to the poor would ope the door
To share the last he had;
And many a secret blessing's pour'd
Upon my collier lad.

He seldom goes to church, I own,
And when he does, why then,
He with a leer will sit and hear
And doubt the holy men;
This very much annoys my heart,
But soon as we are wed,
To please the priest, I'll do my best
To tame my collier lad.

There are many little verses which deal with the badinage which from the earliest time has gone on between young men and young women, and in which it must be owned that the women afford the greatest skill, for they are the most successful in the art of teasing. There is one, for instance, called "Tit for Tat":—

"Say, whither goes my buxom maid
All with the coal-black e'e?"

"Before I answer that," she said,
Give ear, and answer me,

"Pray hast thou e'er thy counsel kept?"

"Ay, and still can," said he:

"And so can I," she said, and swept
A-lilting o'er the lea.

Then comes the time when the man is married and a father, and every night when on the night-shift he is called up in the dead hours by the caller who goes round to see that the men are wakened. Here again is a short poem of eight lines:—

"Get up!" the caller calls, "Get up!"

And in the dead of night,

To win the bairns their bite and sup,

I rise a weary wight.

My flannel dudden donn'd, thrice o'er

My birds are kissed, and then

I with a whistle shut the door

I may not ope again.

It tells in the simplest—if you like, baldest—manner of that which is regularly done and that which at times follows. But it is a true gem and has never been surpassed. The final two lines of these verses call up, as nothing else which I have ever read does, the real nature of pit life, the danger which is faced every time

the miner descends into the pit. Without any straining after effect, but with the simplest statement of fact, Skipsey brings us to the true meaning which lies hidden behind it all, and it is no marvel that these lines have been favourites with all of the leading poets of last century who were familiar with them. The knowledge and the real meaning of the life, and the hidden meaning and the character of the work, lending itself not to fear but frequently to depression, is admirably shown in the little verses, "The Stars are Twinkling."

THE STARS ARE TWINKLING.

The stars are twinkling in the sky
As to the pit I go ;
I think not of the sheen on high,
But of the gloom below.

Not rest or peace, but toil and strife,
Do there the soul enthrall ;
And turn the precious cup of life
Into a cup of gall.

I may also at this point quote two verses which speak of the experience of the married man :—

O ! SLEEP.

O sleep, my little baby ; thou
Wilt wake thy father with thy cries ;
And he into the pit must go,
Before the sun begins to rise.

He'll toil for thee the whole day long,
And when the weary work is o'er,
He'll whistle thee a merry song,
And drive the bogies from the door.

Now I must maintain that if Skipsey had never written anything but the poems I have already given, he would have been remembered as one who had illustrated that which is little thought about, and then perhaps with a feeling akin to contempt—the life of the pitman—with the simplest realistic poetry which all lovers of verse must be for ever thankful to him for. It is the finest realism when without a word too much the character and the manner of a life of which we practically know nothing is brought vividly before us, and in the very realism itself there is a vivid touch of the rare romance which lies in a practical life of this kind.

Before I pass these pit poems I must quote one which he entitles "The Singer," and with which he introduces his volume of "Carols, Songs, and Ballads," published in 1888. Here are two brief verses which tell us so much about the man. There was no aspect of pit life with which he was not familiar. He was a wonderful workman. When a hewer, more than one of his employers has told me that no man they ever knew could hew with him. When he became an official, a deputy or master shifter, he exercised the greatest care and thought and performed his duty admirably. I have said that the depression which from time to time naturally overtakes a man in such an employment was well known to him, but, through

all, his gift of song was to him an abiding strength and a great delight.

THE SINGER.

What tho', in bleak Northumbria's mines,
His better part of life hath flown—
A planet's shone on him, and shines,
To Fortune's darlings seldom known ;

And while his outer lot is grim,
His soul, with light and rapture fraught,
Oft will a carol trill, or hymn
In deeper tones the deeper thought.

Whilst I am speaking of this set of Skipsey's poems, I must mention two others of quite a different kind, though still illustrative of pit life.

The poem called "Bereaved" tells the story of a widow who had lost two children by fever, and had mourned their loss with their father; and then he and his two remaining boys had gone down the pit in the early hours of the morning, and there had been an accident, and they were all taken from her. It is a little long, and is not so concentrated as it might be, but it is well worth reading carefully as a tale of that which constantly happens to one or another of the inhabitants of a pit village.

BEREAVED.

One day as I came down by Jarrow,
Engirt by a crowd on a stone
A woman sat mourning, and sorrow
Seized all who gave heed to her moan.

“Nay, chide not my sad lamentation,
But, oh, let,” she said, “my tears flow—
Nay, offer me no consolation:
I know they are dead down below.

“I heard the dread blast, and I darted
Away on the road to the pit,
Nor stopt till my senses departed,
And left me the wretch I here sit.

“Let—let me sit. No! the bare stones
Are not half so hard, nor so cold,
As the fell blow by which all my dear ones
Must now be laid low in the mould.

“—My mother, poor body, would harry
Me still with a look sad and pale,
When she saw me determined to marry
The dimpled chinn’d lad of the dale.

“Not that she had any objection
To one praised by all; but his drear—
Ah, his drear lot induced a reflection
Too keen for her bosom to bear.

“Nay, chide not my sad lamentation—
My mother sleeps under the yew;
She views not the dire desolation
She dreaded one day I should view.

“—Bedabbled with blood, are my tresses?
No matter!—Unlock not my hand!—
When I bask'd in his tender caresses,
Their hue would his praises command.

“He'll never praise more locks or features,
Nor, when the long day-tide is o'er,
With me view our two happy creatures
With bat and with ball at the door.

“—Nay, chide not—A pair either bolder
Or better nobody could see;
They passed for a year or two older
Than what I could prove them to be.

“Their equals for courage and action
Were not to be found in the place;
And others might boast of attraction,
But none had their colour or grace.

“Their feelings were such—tho' when smitten
By scorn still their blood would rebel—
They wept for the little blind kitten
Our neighbour would drown in the well.

“The same peaceful, calm, and brave bearing
Had still been the father's, was theirs;
And, now we felt older a-wearing,
We deem'd they would lighten our cares.

“So I deem'd, as last night on his shoulder
I hung and beheld them at play—
Ah, I dream'd not how soon they must moulder,
Down, down in their cold bed of clay.

“—Chide, chide not—This sad lamentation
But endeth the burden, began
When, to the whole dale’s consternation,
Our second was crushed by the van.

“That dark day, the words of my mother,
In all the deep tone which had made
Me like a wind-ridden leaf dother,
Rang like the dead-bell in my head.

“Despair, the grim bird, away chidden
Would light on the housetop again;
But still from my husband was hidden
Each thought that had put him to pain.

“He’s pass’d from existence, unharried
By any forebodings of mine;
But he pined when the lisper was buried,
And well for the lisper might pine.

“Ah yes!—To our fancy, the sonsy
Bit bairn with his hair bright and curled—
The bairn had appeared to our fancy
The bonniest bairn in the world.

“As round and as red as a cherry,
With dimple on chin and on cheek,
Was he—and an urchin as merry
As ever play’d hide-and-go-seek.

“His heart full of fun and affection,
Still, still with his canny bit ways,
He wheedled my heart from dejection
And pat a bright look on my face.

“Full oft, upon one leg advancing,
Across to the door he would go,
Wheel round on his heel, then go dancing
With a hop-step-and-jump down the row.

“When—Let my hand go!—When he perished
The rest were yet left to my view;
But now, what remains to be cherished?
But now, what remains to me now?

“—Barely cold was the pet, ere affected
By fever they lay, one and all;
But they lay not like others neglected—
I slept not, to be at their call.

“Day and night, night and day without slumber
I watched till a-weary and worn—
Nay, nay, when death lessen'd the number,
I'd barely strength left me to mourn.

“I've mourned enow since—and tho' cruel
Mishap, like a curst hag, would find
Her way to my door still, the jewel
Has seldom been out of my mind.

“Another so glad and so airy
Ne'er gladden'd a fond mother's sight;
They call'd her a 'wee-winsome fairy,'
And I heard her so call'd with delight.

“Whilst others played, by me she tarried
—The cherub!—and rumour avers
That nowadays many are married
With not half the sense that was hers.

“ Adown on the hearthrug a-sitting,
The long winter nights she was heard,
The whilst her sweet fingers were knitting,
To lilt out her lay like a bird.

“ Did I but look sulky, a-stealing
To me, in my face she would keek,
With a look to the heart so appealing,
I could not but pat her bit cheek.

“ She, once when I prick’d this hard finger
—No, he who in grave-clothes first slept—
No, she—with the senses that linger
I cannot tell which of them, wept.

“ She vanished at last!—ah, an ocean
Of trouble appear’d, that black cup;
But what was it all to the potion
I now am commanded to sup?

“ My husband, my bairnies, my blossoms!
—Well—well, I am wicked—yes, yes;
But take my loss home to your bosoms,
And say if your sin would be less.

“ My husband, my bairnies, my blossoms!
—Well, I will not murmur, but still
The anguish that teareth the bosom’s
Not, not to be bridled at will.

“ The dear ones to perish so sudden!
’Twas only last night, by the hearth,
Whilst I mended their fast-wasting dudden
They—they, the dear bairns, seem’d all mirth.

“ Their cousin came in, and they hasten’d
To hand her, and, handing the chair
The strings of her apron unfastened,
And slipt the back comb from her hair.

“ On leaving, the lassie discovered
The prank they upon her had play’d ;
Awhile hung her head, awhile hovered,
Then pinched both their noses and fled.

“ They laugh’d, clapt their hands, and the father
—Yea, I too, had laugh’d with the rest ;
But something came o’er me which rather
Brought a sigh than a laugh from my breast.

“ The supper was set, and being over
I help’d them to bed, and I think
—As I thought when I spread the green cover—
They’d dover’d to sleep in a wink.

“ I too laid me down, heart a-weary—
And when the birds rose from their bed,
Somehow by a dream dull and dreary
My eyes were fast lock’d in my head.

“ Aroused by their voices, a-yearning
To kiss them, I sprang to the floor ;
They kissed me, and bade me ‘ Good morning,’
Then whistled away from the door.

“ Long after away they had hurried,
Their music arang in my ears,
Then I thought of the jewels we’d buried,
And thought of the jewels with tears.

“Again, in my fancy, they prattled
‘Till—deem it no idle tale, when
I tell you—the window was rattled,
And I thought of the living again.

“Anon, as if something a-seeking,
I open’d the door and keek’d out—
And, out in the darkness keeking,
The names of my darlings must shout.

“An echo came back from the quarry
Just over the way, and in dread
I bolted the door in a hurry,
And hurried again to my bed.

“Did I sleep? I did weep. To his calling
The father had gone hours before;
And now, in that havoc appalling,
He lies with the blossoms I bore.

“Did I sleep? I did weep. Heart a-weary,
How oft have I wept so before?
Not to sleep, but to weep, lone and dreary
I’ve wandered the broken brick floor.

“Did I sleep?—Well, your kind arm, and steady
My tottering steps, and now—now—
Go, get out the winding sheets ready,
And do what remaineth to do.

“Get winding sheets—one for the father,
And two for our darlings and pride,
And one for the wife and the mother—
Ah, soundly I’ll sleep by their side!”

But quite on a different and higher plane than this is the ballad in which Skipsey tells of the terrible calamity which befell the men at work in the Hartley Pit on January 16, 1862. Some of us were privileged to take some part in the consolation of the survivors, and knew well the awful days of fruitless endeavour, the agony of hopeless hope, which stirred not only the wives and mothers in the village of Hartley, but the whole of our land, during those days of weary waiting. It was a time such as has, happily, been rarely known.

The Hartley New Pit is situate near Seaton Delaval. Over the mouth of the pit was the beam of a pumping engine weighing about forty tons. This broke on the 16th day of January, 1862, and fell into the pit as the men were being drawn up in the cage by means of the winding engine. The huge mass crushed everything in its way; it met the ascending cage filled with men, five of whom were killed instantly, three being afterwards extricated alive. It struck the top of the brattice with such force that the whole of the wooden and iron framework was hurled to the bottom of the mine, and thus all means of escape from the lower portion, in which two hundred and fifteen men and boys were buried alive, was cut off. Everything was done that could be done. For six days Mr. Coulson and his gallant band of sinkers worked with little cessation day and night, endeavouring to form a communication with the men in the pit. From time to time there were heard sounds of jowling from the men, that is, the sides of the shaft were evidently struck with hammers, and the sound reached the surface; the torture of suspense was intense. Every day wives, mothers, and

children, and men who had not been down the pit, gathered round to hear any item of news which sinkers who came up for a short period for rest could give them. Numbers of ladies and gentlemen flocked to the village and did their best to console and comfort the weary waiters ; but it was January 22nd before an opening was made into the workings, and three men were able to enter the mine. The air was very bad, and at great danger to themselves they forced their way, finding bodies strewn in all directions, for the whole of the two hundred and fifteen men and boys were dead. Those of us who were privileged to be present when the sad news was confirmed can never forget the terrible time. The cold, snowy, winter night, the hopeless misery of the inhabitants of the cottages, and the distress of the men who had laboured so long in the hope of finding some of their comrades, at all events, still living, were really terrible. It was not only in Hartley or in Northumberland that the thing was felt. Everywhere, from one end of the country to the other, in rural hamlets as well as in crowded cities, there was a deep sympathy with those who had been left widows or fatherless, and an intense desire to provide such help as could be given to them. The Common Council of the City of London laid aside its rules of action to give a hundred guineas. The London Coal Exchange promptly subscribed a thousand guineas ; the brokers in the Stock Exchange and in Lloyds made large contributions. Great meetings were held throughout the North, that at Newcastle being in the old Guildhall on the Sandhill. I think that the Mayor was in the chair, and Lord Durham (the second Lord Durham), who was of an

exceedingly retiring disposition, and was rarely seen amongst us, rose to propose the first resolution. He spoke two sentences, describing the reasons for the meeting, with difficulty, and then broke down altogether, and, sobbing, resumed his seat. No speech that could have been made would have been so effectual. The meeting was a short one. Resolutions were passed immediately, but the subscription which followed showed how intensely the sorrow and grief of the occurrence had come home to every one.

It is little wonder that the event was one which deeply moved Joseph Skipsey, and the ballad which he wrote entitled "The Hartley Calamity" is to my thinking one of the most powerful which has been written in recent times. It is simple, direct, truthful; no words are thrown away, but the whole tale of woe is told with the force of truth. The ballad became popular, and Skipsey was called upon to read it in public at many different places where meetings were held for the purpose of obtaining relief for the survivors. I give it here, but I only wish that I could in any words reproduce the effect which it made when Skipsey himself read it. It was scarcely like reading. I shall have something to say about this hereafter, but in reading his own ballad he entered so evidently into the spirit of the thing and brought out the terrible, tragic nature of the slow death creeping over father and son, carrying away brothers side by side, and told by broken words scratched upon some of the tins, that it was impossible to listen without being greatly affected. The scenes in certain of the places where he read it were almost too painful.

THE HARTLEY CALAMITY.

The Hartley men are noble, and
Ye'll hear a tale of woe ;
I'll tell the doom of the Hartley men—
The year of sixty-two.

'Twas on a Thursday morning, on
The first month of the year,
When there befell the thing that well
May rend the heart to hear.

Ere chanticleer with music rare
Awakes the old homestead,
The Hartley men are up and off
To earn their daily bread.

On, on they toil ; with heat they broil,
And streams of sweat still glue
The stour unto their skins, till they
Are black as the coal they hew.

Now to and fro the putters go,
The waggons to and fro,
And clang on clang of wheel and hoof
Ring in the mine below.

The din and strife of human life
Awake in " wall " and " board,"
When, lo ! a shock is felt which makes
Each human heart-beat heard.

Each bosom thuds, as each his duds
He snatches and away,
And to the distant shaft he flees
With all the speed he may.

Each, all, they flee—by two—by three
They seek the shaft, to seek
An answer in each other's face,
To what they may not speak.

“Are we entombed?” they seem to ask,
For the shaft is closed, and no
Escape have they to God's bright day
From out the night below.

So stand in pain the Hartley men,
And o'er them speedily comes
The memory of home and all
That links us to our homes.

Despair at length renews their strength,
And they the shaft must clear,
And soon the sound of mall and pick
Half drowns the voice of fear.

And hark! to the blow of the mall below
Do the sounds above reply?
Hurra, hurra, for the Hartley men,
For now their rescue's nigh.

Their rescue nigh? The sounds of joy
And hope have ceased, and ere
A breath is drawn a rumble's heard
Re-drives them to despair.

Together now behold them bow;
Their burden'd souls unload
In cries that never rise in vain
Unto the living God.

Whilst yet they kneel, again they feel
Their strength renewed—again
The swing and the ring of the mall attests
The might of the Hartley men.

And hark! to the blow of the mall below,
Do sounds above reply?
Hurra, hurra, for the Hartley men,
For now their rescue's nigh.

But lo! yon light, erewhile so bright
No longer lights the scene;
A cloud of mist yon light has kiss'd
And shorn it of its sheen.

A cloud of mist yon light has kiss'd,
See! how along it steals,
Till one by one the lights are smote,
And deep the doom prevails.

“O father, till the shaft is rid,
Close, close beside me keep;
My eyelids are together glued,
And I—and I—must sleep.”

“Sleep, darling, sleep, and I will keep
Close by—heigh-ho!” To keep
Himself awake the father strives—
But he—he too—must sleep.

“ O, brother, till the shaft is rid,
Close, close beside me keep.
My eyelids are together glued
And I—and I—must sleep.

“ Sleep, brother, sleep, and I will keep
Close by—heigh-ho!” To keep
Himself awake the brother strives—
But he—he too—must sleep.

“ O mother dear! wert, wert thou near
Whilst sleep!” And the orphan slept;
And all night long by the black pit heap
The mother a dumb watch kept.

And fathers, and mothers, and sisters, and
brothers—

The lover and the new-made bride—
A vigil kept for those who slept,
From eve to morning tide.

But they slept—still sleep—in silence dread,
Two hundred old and young,
To awake when heaven and earth have sped
And the last dread trumpet rung.

But I must now leave the poems which deal directly with pit life and return to his own story. After his marriage and when children began to come, he made repeated efforts to get some situation which was of a less onerous kind than that in the mines, but it was 1859 before he succeeded in this. He then published his first book of poems, and the attention of several

persons of influence in the neighbourhood was thus turned to him. The then editor of the *Gateshead Observer* (long since given up), Mr. James Clephan, was one of these. Those who remember him know how great an influence he had, and how full of genuine sympathy and true poetic feeling he was. He succeeded in obtaining Skipsey the place of under-store-keeper at Messrs. Hawks, Crawshay & Co.'s works in Gateshead, and he remained there for more than four years, but a sad accident happened to one of his children, who was run over and killed by a train of waggons passing through the works, and this greatly unsettled him.

The place of sub-librarian at the Literary and Philosophical Society in Newcastle-upon-Tyne happening to become vacant, his friends obtained this appointment for him. It seemed at first as though it was a chance of the most fortunate description, but it must be admitted that he did not fill the appointment in an altogether satisfactory way. As a rule a librarian must know where his books are, and he must know something of what is inside them and be able to satisfy the wishes of members who desire to refer to them or to borrow them, but perhaps the less a sub-librarian knows of the inside of books the better. At all events, Skipsey, not unnaturally, with his intense love of reading, finding himself in what appeared to him boundless pastures, would become absorbed in some passage of a well-known author, and he would scarcely recognise the eager and impatient member who wished for his services forthwith. So before a year had passed he naturally grew discontented and unhappy,

and his friends had many a discussion as to what the best line of action really was. He was popular on the whole, and one of his poems, "The Reign of King Gold," was included amongst the selection which was read by the Rev. Mr. Bellew at one of his lectures. I give this poem in the Appendix, for it is of quite a different kind to any other which I quote. His friends at length advised him to return to the coal-mines, and he did so, and worked patiently away at hewing for many a year. There were few men who ever came near him for power and skill in this, and he at length was appointed to be deputy overman, and he devoted himself to the superior work in a patient, skilful, and conscientious way. In the course of years it became evident that the responsibilities which were laid upon him were so constantly present to him, and the fact that to some extent he held the lives and destinies of his fellow-workmen in his hands became so burdensome, that it was desirable again for him to leave the pits. He was at this time at Backworth Colliery, but had been for many years at Newsham, and for shorter periods at Cowpen and Ashington since he returned to mining.

Backworth has, I may say, always been a centre of intellectual life. Indeed, few people have any idea of how much of this life is to be found in many of our pit villages. I cannot but think that one great agent in making the more thoughtful of our Northumbrian pitmen the really cultured men they are (using the term cultured not simply to signify booklearning) has been the prevalence of religious societies amongst them. In many pit villages you will find three Methodist chapels—the Wesleyan, the Primitive, and the New Connexion.

It would be wrong to say that there was any hostility between them, but the natural competition for members, and the admirable way in which all forms of Methodism make use of all new-comers, and so interest them actively in the work of their congregation, keep a certain amount of spiritual life awake. When this is turned in other directions you find a remarkable thirst for knowledge and a willingness to go through considerable difficulties to obtain it. I remember in 1879, when the Cambridge University Extension movement had spread into Northumberland, Backworth was one of the centres which took an active part in getting it taken up by certain pit villages. There were, if I remember rightly, four of these, and at one time the four villages had 1,700 students. The population of the villages and district was only 19,000, and I much doubt whether in the educational history of the world there has ever been a similar fact.

The Northumbrian pitman is certainly frequently devoted to sports which have their rough but not their brutal side. I should be sorry to draw too flattering a picture of him, but, judging of him fairly, he is as different from the popular idea as can well be conceived. I do not mean to say that there are not many features which exist amongst the class which it would be well to alter, but taking them as a whole they are certainly a remarkable body of men. I can perhaps best illustrate this by telling a story which the late Major Duncan used to tell of his experience amongst them when he was a candidate for the Morpeth Boroughs in the Conservative interest against the well-known and tried member, Thomas Burt. He had been asked to address a meeting

at Bedlington. He said that he went down, as it happened, alone. He was met at the station by a courteous and well-dressed man, who asked him to come with him to his house and have a cup of tea before the meeting. He went down and found in the small three-roomed cottage one or two other men gathered, and the good wife bustled about and made them an admirable tea. After that they smoked their pipes and had a talk, and by and by they went to the meeting. There was a well-filled hall, his friend was voted into the chair and introduced him in a few proper words. He then proceeded to explain his political views, and, after speaking some three-quarters of an hour, during which there was perfect silence excepting for occasional applause, he sat down amidst cheers and thought that he had made an admirable impression. Then a highly respectable gentleman got up and said a few words about the address, and moved, "That this meeting, having heard Major Duncan's explanation of his political principles, is of the opinion that he is not a fit and proper person to represent the borough of Morpeth in Parliament." A second gentleman seconded it, and it was carried unanimously. They were perfectly kind, perfectly polite, and thanked him for the trouble he had taken, but he said that after two or three experiences of this kind it became almost impossible to conduct such a fight. Now, I have often wished that this tale could be generally known. When I read of how political meetings are disturbed and broken up because the speakers are giving vent to opinions which do not agree with those held by their hearers, it always seems to me that the wisest, best, and most courteous way is that adopted

by the Northumbrian pitmen. I have known several cases where there have been meetings held upon labour difficulties which were fiercely acute at a time when the men and the officials of their Union did not agree. This is perhaps the severest test to which men can be put, but, although there was some turbulence and some disorder, the meetings ended in patient listening to that which had to be said in defence of conduct of which they did not approve, and in votes of thanks to those who addressed them.

But I am getting away from Backworth. There, as I said, was a village which was a centre of intellectual life and has more or less continued so through many years. Not only have its people given great audiences to lectures, but they have had societies for reading books of authority, and I have seen them act plays—"The School for Scandal" for instance—with remarkable ability. Of course, there was a little difficulty sometimes as to the pronunciation, but considering all things the performance was interesting and admirable, and some of the performers were consummate actors.

It would be difficult to find a village which has been visited by more men of scientific, literary, or artistic distinction. In its one principal street you might find Professor Owen or Professor Huxley with Sir William G. Armstrong visiting Mr. Athey, a working pitman, who had gathered together one of the finest collections of fossils from the coal measures. If you entered another cottage you would be greeted by a beautifully framed platinotype of "The Golden Stairs," with the legend inscribed upon it, "To his dear friend Joseph Skipsey, from his friend E. Burne Jones," for Skipsey

had been to London with his friend Thomas Dixon the corkcutter, to whom John Ruskin wrote the letters "Time and Tide, by Wear and Tyne." On their way they had visited Oxford, where they stayed with Professor Jowett at Balliol, who had been most kind and courteous to them. In London Skipsey saw many of the men who formed so distinguished an artistic circle, and amongst them Burne Jones, the Rossettis, Holman Hunt, and Theodore Watts. Dante Gabriel Rossetti was of real service to him, for they had corresponded before meeting, and he afterwards wrote to him letters of good and sound advice. I think that I ought to give to my readers some extracts from these letters, for they show how a man who was himself a worker of consummate ability in two realms of art held my friend, and the real and unusual merit which he discerned in his poetry. He appraised it at its true value, and did not scruple to find fault where he saw that it was right to do so. Much harm was done from time to time by those who lavished indiscriminate praise upon the poems, and who compared Skipsey with some of the greatest men who lived during the beginning of last century. It was a thing to be very grateful for that Dante Gabriel Rossetti was kind and full of encouragement, and that his praise was made more valuable by being tempered with a certain amount of blame.

In 1878 (October 29th) Dante Rossetti wrote to him : "I am gratified to know that my poems appeal at all to you. Yours struck me at once. The real-life pieces are more sustained and decided than almost anything of the same kind that I know—I mean in poetry coming really from a poet of the people who describes what he

knows and mixes in. 'Bereaved' is perhaps the poem which most unites poetic form with deep pathos: the Hartley ballad is equal in another way, but written, I fancy, to be really sung, like the old ballad. 'Thistle and Nettle' shows the most varied power of all, perhaps. In this, and throughout the book, the want I feel is of artistic finish only, not of artistic tendency: the right touch sometimes seems to come to you of its own accord, but, when not thus coming, it remains a want. Stanzas similarly rhymed are apt to follow each other, and the metre is often filled out by catching up a word in repetition—I mean, as for instance, 'May be, as they have been, may be,' &c.

"Other favourites of mine are 'Persecuted,' 'Willy to Lily,' 'Mother Wept' (this very striking) and 'Nancy to Bessy.' It seems to me that, as regards style, you might take the verbal perfection of your admirable stanzas 'Get Up' as an example to yourself, and try never to fall short of this standard, where not a word is lost or wanting. This little piece seems to me equal to anything in the language for direct and quiet pathetic force."

I should like to give the whole of the poems specially praised by Rossetti, but have already given "Mother Wept," "Get Up," and "Bereaved."

Skipsey was one of those men who cannot do things by halves, and when he went to the pit he gave his mind thoroughly to mining, and was, as I have said, not only an exceptionally powerful hewer, but also thoroughly acquainted with the details of pit management. After being made a deputy he became master shifter, and it was interesting indeed, though not without a shade of



JOSEPH SKIPSEY



sadness, to know the great amount of thought and care which he gave to the fulfilment of his duties.

Before I follow him into his life away from the pits I must note that he still devoted his leisure time to literature, and published volumes of poems in 1871, 1878, and 1881, and I must say a little about those poems which, though not immediately illustrating pit life, reflect the younger days of those who follow that life, and give us, possibly, glimpses of some of the things which passed through our poet's mind, and were recollections of that which he had himself absolutely gone through or had noted in the lives of his friends. It is not possible to say how many of his little songs relating to the different pits and the coal villages were inspired by actual personal feeling, but there can be no doubt that many of them have a charm of their own which makes them appeal to the reader as truthful pictures of that which not infrequently happens.

Perhaps I should put as one of these the poem entitled "Thistle and Nettle." It is rather long, but it is one of the few instances in which Skipsey does himself justice in a narrative. It is the record of the wooing of a maid by one whom she had favoured in her early days, but whom she had shunned when she grew to womanhood, having conceived something of an aversion for the male sex. When "Thistle" sought her out with the purpose of wooing her, the state of her mind towards the race of men was soon made clear. At first "Nettle" was exceedingly angry at his wooing her at all, and she inveighed against the whole race of men, whilst he replied to her with much gentleness and succeeded gradually in bringing her to a milder mood. But it is not until he

turns back to the days of childhood and their constant happy intercourse then that he really makes an impression, and the poem ends happily. It is really one which is full of nature, full of little touches of simple beauty, at times of humour or of pathos, and I scarcely think that any one will study it carefully without coming to understand the high position which Dante Rossetti gave it.

THISTLE AND NETTLE.

'Twas on a night, with sleet and snow
From out the North a tempest blew,
When Thistle gather'd nerve to go
The little Nettle's self to woo.

Within her father's cottage soon,
And quite alone, he found the maid;
She then was knitting to a tune
The wind upon the window play'd.

His errand known, her needles down
She laid, and rising from the board,
She took the broom and swept the room
And spake her mind by deed and word,

"Have I not seen enough to be
Convinced for ever, soon or late,
The maid shall rue the moment she
Attendeth to a wooer's prate?

"When men are void of falsehood, then,
But never may that time befall:
Of five times five-and-twenty men
There's barely five are men at all.

“Before the timid maid they’ll fall,
And smile, and weep, and sigh, and sue,
Till once they get her in their thrall,
Then, then she’s doom’d her lot to rue.

“For her a subtle snare they weave,
And when the bonny bird is theirs,
Then, then they giggle up their sleeve,
Then, then they laugh at all her fears.

“When lilies on the docken bloom—
The cherry on the bramble grows—
When men are to be trusted—come,
And I will listen to thy vows.

“Yes, then I’ll hear what thou may’st swear—
Till then I—I am on my guard;
And he, the loon that brings me down,
He, he’ll be pardoned on my word.”

Thus for an hour her tongue was heard;
By this her words grown faint and few,
She rais’d the broom at every word,
And thump’d the floor to prove it true.

In ardent tones the youth replied—
“Dread hollow-hearted guile thou must;
But deem not all of honour void,
Nor punish all with thy mistrust.

“A few, not all, the lash have earned;
Let but that few the lash then rue—
The world were topsy-turvy turned,
Were all to suffer for a few.

“Destroy the weed, but spare the flower;
Consume the chaff, but keep the grain;
Nor harry one who'd die before
He'd give thy little finger pain.”

On hearing this, she sat her down,
Resumed her needlework, and then
—Tho' yet she strove to wear a frown—
Made answer in a milder strain:—

“End, end thy quest. Deceitful words
May be, as they have been, may be
A fatal lure to lighter birds—
They'll never prove the like to me.

“Still, by my honesty, I vow,
As I have kept the cheat at bay,
So, should I keep my senses, so
I'll keep him till my dying day.

“The best that man could do or say,
The love of gold or jewel rare—
Not all that wealth can furnish may—
May ever lead me in a snare.—

“So end thy quest.” He only prest
His ardent suit the more, while she,
At every word he uttered, garr'd
Her fleeing needles faster flee.

“My quest by Honour's justified,
I have still eyed and found thee still
The maid I'd like to be my bride—
Would I could say the maid that will.

"Hadst thou but been the daffodil
That dances to each breeze, for—yea
For all thy suitor valued, still
Thou so hadst danced thy life away.

"But thou so fair art chaste." Thus he
Unto her answer answers e'er,
And that too in a way that she
Must will or nill his answer hear.

Then, then the chair he'd ta'en, his chair
Unto her chair he nearer drew;
Recurr'd to memories sweet and dear,
And in the softer key did woo.

"How canst thou me," he said, "disdain?
How canst thou so my truth suspect?
How canst thou put me to this pain?
Reflect, upon the past reflect!

"A time there was, and time shall pass
To me ere that forgotten be,
When side by side, from tide to tide,
We played and sported on the lea.

"Then, then have I not chased the bee
From bloom to bloom—oft chased and caught,
And, having drawn its sting, in glee
To thee the little body brought?

"Then, when a bloom of rarer dyes
Into my busy fingers fell,
To whom was reached the lucky prize?
Cannot thy recollection tell?

“Nay, when the fleetful summer went,
Who pull’d with thee the haw, bright, brown,
—Brown as thine own brown eyes—and bent
For thee the richest branches down?

“With blooms I’ve bound thy yellow hair;
With berries fill’d thy lap; thy hand
—That hand as alabaster fair—
Had every gift at thy command.

“Nay, tho’ to others dour, yet meek
I ever was to thee, and kind;
And when we played at hide-and-seek
I hid where thou wouldst seek to find.

“Upon the playground still unmatched
Was I, unless with thee I play’d;
And then it seem’d to those who watched
My failures were on purpose made.

“None, up and down so well I bobb’d
To skip the rope with me would try—
Didst thou attempt? my skill was robbed,
Another skipt thee out—not I.

“The ball I knock’d to others, mock’d
Their efforts to arrest its flight;
But when the ball to thee I knock’d,
It would upon thy lap alight.

“Then, while I kepp’d another’s ball,
Away thine went unkepp’d away;
And did I win a game at all,
Say, was it by my efforts, say?

“As sure as e’er a race began,
That race was mine unless thou join’d;
And then I always was out-ran,
For still with thee I lagg’d behind.

“This fired the winner’s self-conceit
—Once fired—till thou for winning-post
Again we ran—he ran to beat—
But thrice we ran, and thrice he lost.

“Time vanished thus, and childhood pass’d;
But ere the lasses reach their teens
Atween them and the lads a vast
Mysterious distance intervenes.

“They seldom on the green appear
In careless sport and play, and if
They join the throng, erect they wear
Their head, and still their air is stiff.

“They ail they know not what. And such
The change that on my lassie fell;
Then would she shrink my hand to touch
And I half-feared her touch as well.

“Had I changed too? This can I tell—
That touch o’er me a spell would cast;
And did I pass her in the dell,
With slow and snail-like pace I pass’d.

“Her voice had lost its former ring,
Yet, in that voice such power was flung,
I better liked to hear her sing
Than when of old to me she sung.

“Her touch, her tone, her sight would gar
Me shake, and tho’ with all my might
I strove to please, and please but her,
I ever blunder’d in her sight.

“When by the hearth she sewing sat,
Did I to thread her needle try?
Still, still my heart played pit-a-pat,
And still I miss’d the needle’s eye.

“Such, when I held to her the hank,
Such slips and knots occur’d, we heard
Aunt’s dreaded tongue go clink-a-clank
Before the dancing end appear’d.

“‘What ails the lass?’ she often said—
‘She’s sound asleep!’ once said, and flew,
And snatched and snapt the tangled thread,
While I—I know not how—withdrew.

“Fled, fled, too fled those hours! alack!
They came and went like visions rare,
To mock the heart, delude and wrack,
And leave the gazer in despair.

“Ah, less—tho’ sun-illumed—less fair
The blobs that dance adown the burn,
And let them burst, they’ll reappear
Ere those delightful hours return.

“Yet they may live in thought, and could
They live within thy thought again,
Wouldst thou not change thy bearing? would—
Wouldst thou not change this bitter strain?

“Wouldst thou thy lover still disdain ?

Wouldst thou continue thus to gall
And put him to this cruel pain ?

—Recall to mind the past, recall !”

Thus onward, on, his ditty flows

Until—her ruffled brow is sleek—

Until the lily drives the rose,

The rose the lily from her cheek.

Then, then, entranced he press'd her side ;

“Wouldst thou consent”—averr'd—“ah, then
A knot should by the priest be tied
The priest should never loose again.

“In heart and hand excelled by none,

Henceforth I'd front the ills of life,

And every victory I won

Should be a jewel for my wife.

“So should the people of the dell

When they convened to gossip, say

For harmony we bore the bell,

And—Nay, turn not thine eyes away.

“Lift, lift thy head ; be not ashamed ;

If thus to feel—if thus to do—

As matters sinful might be blamed,

Then saints were sinners long ago.”

Thus while the iron's sparking hot,

Around with might and main he swings ;

And down upon the proper spot,

With bang on bang the hammer brings.

Deep silence then ensues. The cat,
That lately to the nook did creep,
To mark the sequel of their chat
Lies now upon the hearth asleep.

The needles that flew here and there,
And in their motions sought to vie
A moonbeam dance upon the mere,
Neglected on her apron lie.

In concord with the storm within,
The storm without forbears to blow;
And 'tween the sailing clouds, begin
The joyous stars to come and go.

O'er all delight prevails. Her head
Upon the breast she just did seem
To dread, as man will death, the maid—
Lo, she, she's in a golden dream!

Dream on, sweet May! An hour like this
Annuls an age of cark and strife,
And turns into a drop of bliss
The bitter cup of human life.

The tear is by a halo gilt—
Our cares made pleasant to endure—
The doleful dirge a merry lilt,
By thinking on this happy hour.

"I've heard," in language low and soft,
At length her heart begins to flow;—
"I've heard of honey'd tongues full oft,
But never felt their force till now.

“Still would I fume, as day by day
I’ve seen the lasses bought and sold
By some I’d scorn’d to own, had they
Outweighed their very weight in gold.

“My hour of triumph’s o’er. In vain
Did I my fellow-maids abuse;
I’ve snatched the cup, and drank the bane
Which sets me in their very shoes,

“That turns a heart of adamant
To pliant wax; and, in my turn,
Subjects me to the bitter taunt,
The vanquished victor’s ever borne:

“That leaveth Nettle satisfied
To leave her kith and kin, and by
Her ever-faithful Thistle’s side,
To shelter till the day they die.”

One of the sweetest of the songs which he wrote, and which come into the category of those which reflect the younger part of his life, is “Mary of Crofton,” and the two last lines of the third verse are a charming bit of natural sentiment.

MARY OF CROFTON.

Ah! a lovely jewel was Mary of Crofton,
And now she is cold in the clay,
We think of the heart-cheering image as often
As we pass down the old waggon way.

So endearing and winning her bearing, the cherry
The heart of the stoic entranced ;
While yet her wee feet beat a measure as merry
As ever by damsel was danced.

Her voice had a sweetness that only the silly
Bit linnet to vie it might seek ;
And the rose in her hair was a daffodowndilly
Compared with the rose on her cheek.

Sue, Bessy, and Kitty still ornament Crofton,
And rich are the charms they display ;
But we miss the sweet image of Mary as often
As we pass down the old waggon way.

But I think that I have quoted sufficient of these early works to show what Skipsey could do, and those who wish for more must acquire his poems, or refer to those I give in the Appendix. They have never taken possession of what I may call the pit life of the district. I do not think that any of them are set to music, and perhaps none have the natural and inborn lilt which distinguishes the true song.

From their very nature few of them appeal directly to the reader, and they are lacking in the little touches of natural feeling which give peculiar charm to the songs of Burns, but they are well worth reading, and reading carefully, because they are all characteristic to some extent of an actual life, certain aspects of which are admirably illustrated by them. There are certain of them which have much wider tendency than others, and express feelings which are the property of mankind.

Those which treat of things which are peculiar in a certain sense to the pit life, the meetings at fairs, the little coquetries of the village beauties, and the like, are too often given by a special and a characteristic name a certain binding, as it were, to a special kind of life and place, but there are others which are quite different. For instance, there is one entitled "The Slippers":—

Two slippers in the morning red
Along the pathway flew;
Two slippers down the burnside sped,
And lo, a sight to view!

Yon loath'd way now is my delight,
And what was long and rough,
Is now as smooth as velvet quite,
And far from long enough.

Yon bur, whose rudeness only earn'd
From me a grunt or so,
Is to a golden lily turn'd
To charm me as I go.

Yon pebble, late but fit for feet
To kick into the air,
Is now to me a jewel, meet
For any queen to wear.

Yon runnel that was only heard
A dreary noise to make,
Now pipes as sweetly as a bird,
And pipes so for my sake!

“La, how comes this?” That question—Tut—
Who, who can answer? Who?
Go, put it to the slippers, put!
That down the footway flew.

This appeals more or less to all men who remember that they were ever young, and who have any recollection of the time when they themselves suffered from the trials and delights of what they, at all events, called love.

But all his songs or little poems are good, sound, and healthy ones. There is nothing behind them; nothing equivocal in them; they are all straight and true. Some of them lack anything of inspiration—they are deliberate makings and so not satisfactory. But they all had cost him much labour, and some rewarded it. Although in different editions of his “Songs and Lyrics” many of his verses were much altered it was not by any means easy to persuade him to make any alteration.

I remember well in the first edition of his poems he had taken the two lines from Shakespeare:—

“Hey Robin, jolly Robin, tell me how thy lady
doth,”

and went on—

“Is she sighing, is she sobbing?”

and so forth. But with him “sobbing” lost its “g” and was made therefore into a good rhyme for Robin. This frequent loss of “g” final must be borne in mind in reading all Skipsey’s poems. It must not be forgotten

that his language and pronunciation were all to a great extent racy of the soil, and therefore it constantly happens that in his poems you find a rhyme which you might think was a deliberately bad one if you did not know how the poet himself would have read it. He was very particular really upon the question of pronunciation, but it was no easy task to convince him that he ever erred in this respect. At one time we used to meet twice a week, to read together, in order that he might get away from some of the commonest and most difficult of the faults which were his, but it did not answer; for he was no sooner corrected as to the mispronunciation of a word than he would start to argue how it ought to be pronounced, and to endeavour to convince you that if it was not pronounced as he pronounced it, his was the right plan.

In the next verse of "Hey Robin" as it stood originally, he had it—

"Is she like a lambkin skipping, 'mid her maidens
in the hall,"

and on telling him that I thought there was some little mistake here because, so far as my knowledge went, it was not the custom for ladies to skip in the hall amongst their maidens and I thought it was a mistake likely to produce ridicule, he saw the point and made many alterations of the verse from time to time, but he never got it to his satisfaction. The poem on the whole is an admirable one. It has real ability, but there is always the want of some motive for the second verse. It stands once:—

Is she like a finch so merry
Lilting in her father's hall,
Or the crow with cry, a very
Plague to each, a plague to all.

It would have been better if he had left it out altogether. There is no need for it, and the rest ran well enough; but no, it was a very precious verse for some reason to him, and have it he would, although he used from time to time to alter it. The last time he altered the finch to the lark, but that made it very little better, because the idea of a lark lilting in a hall is not an exquisite one. There was really no excuse for keeping the verse in. But the last verse is a fine one.

HEY ROBIN.

(The first two lines are old.)

Hey Robin, jolly Robin,
Tell me how thy lady doth?
Is she laughing, is she sobbing,
Is she gay, or grave, or both?

Is she like the finch, so merry,
Lilting in her father's hall?
Or the crow with cry a very
Plague to each, a plague to all?

Is she like the violet breathing
Blessings on her native place?
Or the cruel nettle scathing
All who dare approach her grace?

Is she like the dew-drop sparkling
When the morn peeps o'er the land?
Or the cloud in mid-air darkling,
When a fearful storm's at hand?

Tut, to count the freaks of woman,
Count the pebbles of the seas;
Rob, thy lady's not uncommon,
Be or do she what she please!

Skipsey remained at Backworth until the year 1882. By this time he felt the weight of his constant daily labour telling upon him. He was fifty years of age, and the greater part of his life had been spent in arduous and dangerous employment, and when he became an official, in anxious responsible work. So his friends again sought some place for him where he might have more ease, and a caretaker being wanted at a new Board School in Mill Lane, Newcastle, Mrs. Skipsey and he were chosen to fill the place. This was on the whole a congenial employment, but, as the school grew, the duties soon became too great, and the burden proved too heavy for his good wife.

The first wing of the Armstrong College had been built in 1887-8, and in September, 1888, Skipsey was appointed porter of the establishment. He fulfilled his duties admirably, but this too proved clearly not the place for him. One morning I was taking Lord Carlisle over the new building, and our Principal joined us (Principal Garnett). As we went along the great corridor, Skipsey, bending beneath the weight of two coal-scuttles of considerable dimensions, met us. He at once pulled up, and Lord Carlisle, recognising him, took

him by the hand, and said, "My dear Skipsey, whatever are you doing here?" We had a long talk, and explanations were made, but I saw from that time that it was quite impossible to have a College where the scientific men came to see the Principal and the artistic and literary men came to see the porter. It was not easy to find the proper place for Joseph Skipsey, for he was altogether an exceptional man, and it was desirable that any place which he obtained should give employment also to Mrs. Skipsey.

Now at this time some of us heard of a probable vacancy which seemed to be the very thing for a man of a poetical mind who required lighter work, but that of a congenial kind. The Misses Chataway, who had for many years been the custodians of Shakespeare's house at Stratford-on-Avon were about to retire, and we urged Skipsey to become a candidate for the place. After paying a visit to the interesting town he did apply, but there were many applicants. He, however, was the chosen one, and it could scarcely be otherwise. The list of those who supported him was altogether a remarkable one—Browning, Tennyson, John Morley, Burne Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Theodore Watts, Leighton, F. R. Benson, Andrew Lang, Lord Carlisle, W. M. Rossetti, Austin Dobson, Bram Stoker, Lord Ravensworth, Thomas Burt, William Morris, Wilson Barrett, Edmund Gosse, Professor Dowden and many other men of mark, bore willing testimony to his intrinsic value. The body with whom the election lay was a large and important one, and he was asked to interview it. There must have been a certain curiosity to see what manner of man this was of whom so many leading men

spoke with enthusiasm. When he went in amongst them they would see a tall, portly, well-proportioned man, with a fine, grave face—that of a thinker. He was dressed in a black frock-coat, and might have been one of themselves, but for the somewhat retiring and aloof expression of his eyes. His appearance was prepossessing, but when he spoke there was some hesitation amongst them. The account which he gave me of the matter was sufficiently amusing. His accent was strong racy Northumbrian with a curious South-country pronunciation of certain words which he had no doubt obtained when, as a very young man, he was working in London. He was asked to withdraw, and the matter was considered. When he was re-admitted the chairman said, “Well, Mr. Skipsey, the Committee are very favourably inclined towards you, but there is some difficulty about your pronunciation.” “I should like, sir, to argue that question. I know that my pronunciation is not quite like yours, but I must be allowed to say that I conceive it is much better, and should like to proceed to prove it.” That was not required, but it says much for the excellence and wisdom of the Committee that they should still have elected him, and it also explains something of the true magnetism of the man. Theoretically this place seemed an ideal refuge for a poet, and I admit that I thought that in all probability he would end his days at Stratford, but some six months after he had entered upon the duties of his office my wife and I went over to visit him. We were much struck with the tranquil and delightful beauty of the place. His house was charming; the garden, in which the Misses Chataway had made a

point of growing all the plants which they could get and which Shakespeare speaks of, was—to North-country eyes at all events—a Paradise. But we soon found that the work was not that for which our friends were suited. They were too old to be transplanted from the North. Mrs. Skipsey never took root amongst the kindly people of a strange tongue, and she missed her children much. It was worse with Skipsey. To have to conduct parties over the little house, and explain each place and give a history of each piece of furniture many times a day, was in itself a great trial. The visitors were not always thoughtful and reasonable. Some of the large parties of Americans who came were especially difficult to satisfy. They were very sceptical. How did he know which room Shakespeare was really born in? Was the history which he gave of a table, a chair, or a desk really true? How did he know there ever was such a man as Shakespeare? In the States they had shown satisfactorily that Lord Bacon of Verulam had written the plays attributed to Shakespeare. It was much more likely that a peer of the realm and a great lawyer should write them than a poor play-actor. And so the talk went on, and poor Skipsey's temper ran short, and his mind was often bewildered, and at the end of a busy day he was quite exhausted and unfit for anything. I found that he had begun to doubt that the story which he had been taught was really in any sense true. The constant suspicion and doubts freely and often cleverly expressed had worked upon his mind. He felt that if he were to make this his life's labour he would end by doubting the very existence of Shakespeare, and so he resigned his place and came home to the North. He

had been well and kindly treated at Stratford, but he had tried in vain to do that for which he was not suited.

In September, 1880, Burne Jones sent Skipsey a letter which runs as follows:—

“NORTH END.

“MY DEAR FRIEND,—There is a little question I want to ask you if I knew how to put it.

“You remember when we walked up and down the garden here I talked of some happy possibility of your ever being free from your present work? I keep it always on my mind, but it may be many a day before we can compass anything. From time to time as I see opportunity I feel my way, and one day I may be successful, but meantime a friend of mine [this friend proved to be Mr. Gladstone, who was then Prime Minister] much interested in your work and in our dear friend Dixon's life, would like to offer you a little annual sum for the purchase of books or photographs, or what not. It is not much—£10 yearly, I think—and it comes straight from the Prime Minister, and you can take it without feeling any discomfort, for it is from a public fund for such purposes, and it was thought you might not dislike it, and that it would help to furnish a little library for you, however little leisure you now have to read. Just tell me if you would like it. It has been put so vaguely to me at first that I cannot quite tell if it is permanent or ends with the present Ministry. But I will ask that question to-day. If you dislike the idea you will forgive my having spoken of it to you, but it is meant to be some public recognition and sympathy, and little as it is it might help you to collect a little store of the books you love for happier days to come.

Just tell me in a line if it would not be distasteful to you, and I will have it settled at once.

"I am writing in the middle of work, and so will end with the business part of my letter. Only always believe me

"Your affectionate friend,

"E. BURNE JONES."

This was followed by a letter headed—

"THE GRANGE.

"MY DEAR FRIEND,—I do not know whether you have had definite notice from headquarters yet, but the grant is an annuity for life, and is not affected by the going out of a Ministry, and I am very glad you have accepted it, for I know with what hearty goodwill it has been offered.

"In great haste, believe me

"Yours,

"E. B. J."

In January, 1886, Skipsey received a donation from the Royal Bounty of £50, and the annuity was raised to £25 a year. But his children were now grown up, and they contributed to the housekeeping expenses, and I think that the years which elapsed from this time until the loss of his wife in 1902 were probably the best he ever had known.

There were many matters with which he busied himself. He had always, for instance, been greatly interested in the subject of Spiritualism and devoted considerable time to it. He also claimed to have clairvoyant powers. In 1876 he wrote a complete explanation of this matter as he then found it. In

writing to a friend he said, "To tell you more than you already know in regard to my seership would require an elaborate treatise. You know that I get my visions in the normal state, chiefly in the light at all hours of the day or night, and with my eyes open. Nearly all external objects, whether crystalline, opaque, smooth, or coarse, polished or otherwise, serve as mirrors or media in which or through which I may see. One thing I have not explained to you, and that is when I am in my best mood for seeing I very often feel as though my face, beard, and other parts of my body, and more especially the eyes, were anointed or steeped in oil. This I experience let my visions be what they may, whether of a celestial, a human, or a demoniacal character. The great majority of my visions are human, more especially since I began to make Spiritualism my study. Visions of a symbolical character and of spirit life I believe I have had, but I have always been very careful what conclusions I drew from the sight of such phenomena. Some seers are very fond of such visions, but before they ask me to listen to their discussions, I should feel obliged to them if they would relate something they have seen, which can be proved to have had an objective existence. The description of the past life of the Samaritan woman by the Nazarene at the well is to me of a thousand times more value than the unnatural visions of St. John of Revelations, which by the by are not revelations but riddles, in the unriddling of which the reader is guided by no principle drawn from the philosophy of life. I should tell you, as you are so much interested in the welfare of Spiritualism and the development of mediumship, that I believe the

seer gift to be special, and that a person must be born with it to be a good seer. I must also tell you that, rare as this gift appears to be, its inheritor must also be well endowed in other respects, and possess a qualified mind before he or she can make a proper use of it, and that it is folly, because a person has displayed some symptoms of seeing, to encourage him to cultivate it before he has become possessed of good mental training."

Then he goes on to lay emphasis on the word "seer" as being the word for the representation of that faculty by which some people are enabled to see spiritual things, and he goes on to relate a long conversation he had with an old furnace-man in which Skipsey told him a great deal about his life, and he ends by claiming the power to see spiritual phenomena.

I cannot go in much more detail into this part of Skipsey's experience. From time to time we discussed points relating to seership and to Spiritualism, but as we did not agree in our views upon the matter, we gradually ceased to do this. The last thing I know about it was that I was asked to attend a séance of avowed spiritualists at which Skipsey was present. I need not enter into any minute description of what went on. Such things are now very well known. Suffice it to say that as we walked away together after the séance I told Skipsey that I had been impressed with one thing, which was that the medium, who was a person of the highest respectability, did not attempt wilfully to deceive the congregation of persons present, but was herself deceived, and went through a very considerable mental struggle, but that I had seen sufficient to persuade myself that the thing was absolutely a mistake from the

very bottom. A certain light which appeared upon a baize curtain was interpreted to be a beautiful child. It was impossible to see any detail of form or feature. It entered into conversation with several people in the room. I at last entered actively into conversation with it, and as I happened to be very familiar with the ways of children, I got it somewhat excited, and as soon as I did this I noticed that the "dis" and "dat" pronunciation of the "th," which was always "d" at first, ceased to be "d" and became "th." Every time this happened I made a stroke upon my shirt-cuff, and when we got out I told Skipsey what I had done. I said to him, "This is only a very slight matter, but it is one which to me is far more convincing than anything more elaborate. No child, however you may excite it, who cannot pronounce 'th' will pronounce it because of excitement. It has to be taught deliberately and painfully to make 'd' into 'th.' You cannot bring this result about in any other way, and here are eleven times in which this supposed child made the alteration." I remember well that Skipsey stood quite still and for a considerable time said nothing, and then he said, "You have opened a door to me, giving a clear view of that which has long puzzled me; I won't say more to-night." From that day he never mentioned Spiritualism to me, and I am informed by those who were near to him that he abandoned it altogether.

In the year 1886 my wife and I persuaded Skipsey to accompany us to the Lake District for a week or ten days. He had at that time never seen mountains or lakes. It was the first real holiday which he had ever had, and his wonder and delight were a joy to witness.

We first went to Portinscale. Everything was new to him. When he came down to breakfast on the first morning he looked worn and weary. He explained that he had wakened at daylight and could not get to sleep again for the shouting of the little owls. I assured him that there were no owls in the tower of the hotel or in the immediate neighbourhood, but he was quite certain I was wrong. After breakfast I went up with him to his bedroom and found the swifts circling round and round the tower and uttering their shrill twitter, and he had taken this noise for the hooting of the owls.

He was much delighted with the Druidical Circle, "Meg and her daughters," and he had great satisfaction in seeing for himself, for the first time, the prehistoric remains of what was probably a religion long since extinct. But boating on Derwentwater, visiting Southey's house, seeing the water come down at Lodore, and walking up Borrowdale, quite excited him with intense delight. Never have I seen anything to approach his enjoyment. Remember that mountains and lakes were before this unknown to him, that the farms, the sheep and cattle, the country folk at work, and the streams babbling down the dale, were unlike anything he had ever seen; and then the mere fact that Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey, Lamb, and De Quincey, Sir Walter Scott, Christopher North, Thomas Gray, and many another of the great men of the past, had lived in or visited these scenes gave to them a sacred character which he felt strongly. We passed on next to stay at a lovely house situate on the pony path above Grasmere, and were gracefully entertained by the lady who owns it. Every day gave Skipsey fresh joy. We rowed along

Grasmere Lake and climbed Loughrigg, and in doing so we chanced upon a bird's nest with four eggs in it. These he carefully inspected, but was most anxious that no harm should come from the inspection, and we sat down some little distance away until, to his great joy, we saw the mother bird return. This excursion is recorded in the following lines :—

THE FAIR ROWER.

She took the oars and rowed along
With such a grace, the mere did waken
Into a sweet melodious song,
At every charming stroke was taken.

And at each sound, the hills around,
By many a magic memory haunted,
And skies did seem with joy to gleam
Within the mere, her strokes enchanted.

A second he entitled "To a Startled Bird, on climbing Loughrigg with some friends, 1886."

Fly not away, wee birdie, pray!
No weasels we, no evil bringers,
Would make thee bear the pangs that tear
Too oft the hearts of sweetest singers.

Long may thy nest with eggs be blest,
And prove with these brown four, yet fountains
Of tender lays to charm the days
Of future climbers of the mountains.

Another day we visited Rydal Mount, Dove Cottage, and the touchingly beautiful churchyard at Grasmere.

He was often too much moved for speech. Indeed, he was naturally not a talkative man. He was in the habit at home of staying much in a room by himself excepting at meal-times, and working there and thinking out his poems, and it was generally only at the family meals that his wife and family saw anything of him, but then he conversed freely upon all manner of matters. When in a general company he joined in all conversation, and held his own on whatever the subject might be. But in the grounds of Rydal Mount he was most silent. I cannot tell what actual estimate he had formed of his own poetic powers. He certainly felt himself a full member of the Fraternity of the Bards, and had the sense of a certain kinship with the great men who had gone before him. In the verses which he afterwards wrote describing this time he imagines Wordsworth stooping to crown him "The Rustic Bard." But there is nothing of conceit in this. He knew that at times he had felt the true inspiration; he knew also that in these things there are those who belong and those who do not, and that the barrier between them cannot be passed. He further knew that among them "there is no first nor last," that some have wider sympathies and greater variety, but that "all service is the same to God." He listened perhaps too much and too frequently to those who, without judgment or knowledge, thought to please him by extravagant and undigested praise. They would say that such and such a song about "Lily" or "Annie" was beyond anything which Burns had ever written, but he was not spoiled by such talk, only a little moved for a moment; then the truth made way, and it was here that the calm, thoughtful good sense of Dante

Gabriel Rossetti was of so much service to him. I do not think that his judgment of his contemporaries or of those close to him was always to be relied upon, as is shown in these very lines. He would put Wordsworth and Rossetti side by side as of equal importance, but I think that this was only carrying beyond its reasonable limits the fact that there is no first nor last in questions of this kind.

But to return to Grasmere, and the happy visit to Heugh Folds. As I have pointed out, Skipsey had always a hankering after the supernatural, and he was by no means a disbeliever in ghosts. One morning when he came down to breakfast he had a look which showed clearly that something had happened, but he would not say what. He acknowledged that he had not slept until the dawn of day. After some time he told us that he was falling asleep about midnight, when he heard soft sounds proceeding from different parts of the room. Then there was quiet for a time, and again the noises came, and the bedclothes were gently moved. There was some one in the room who could enter without opening the door. He lay in anxious expectation until the light of day gleamed through the blinds, when he got up to unravel the mystery and heard an unmistakable mew from his nocturnal visitant. He was not quite pleased at the free laughter at his adventure, but it was recorded in the host's visitors' book—

At dead of night strange murmurs came,
Poor Skipsey's heart went pat ;
Alas for his poetic fame,
The ghost mewed ! 'Twas the cat.

He was always fond of music, and had an excellent taste in that which he cared most about. But he was chiefly touched by songs, and especially by the old Scotch and Irish songs, although he had a large acquaintance with German songs and song-writers to which I must allude hereafter, and which had a great influence upon his own verses. The old North-country songs, old Irish ditties, Burns' and Scotch songs generally, were his great delight. He made the acquaintance of a young lady at Grasmere who was a sweet singer, and who was liberally kind in satisfying his insatiate desire, and, naming her by the name of her father's house, he speaks of her grace and worth, and then adds—

Had we the power
A song would be yon lady's dower,
As sweet as e'er in midnight hour,
To bugle ring
Did Echo from her airy tower
In rapture sing!

Ay, could the deed the will display
Then, then were sung what thou, mad fay,
Sweet Echo, to its spells a prey,
Would yet prolong,
Till all the world had pass'd away
In one wild song!

This first holiday in the real country, far from towns, manufactories, or mines, with nothing to do but enjoy himself, with the reminiscences of the great school of Lake

poets, and with the beauties of nature always around him, made a lasting impression on Skipsey, and his mind constantly turned back to it as to a great landmark in his life.

But he was to have a time of still greater excitement. Amongst the many friends he had made were a young married couple, Mr. and Mrs. J. R. Wood, who were spending a year or two in the old country before they returned to the land of their adoption, Australia. Amongst other things they were the possessors of a yacht, and they kindly persuaded Skipsey to make a voyage to Norway with them. That is a great experience for any man; for him it was a real revelation. There is much affinity between our North land and that glorious country, and that affinity has existed since the earliest historic times. In our popular speech we habitually use many Norse words, and I have known Northumbrians who, fancying that they could understand whole sentences spoken by Norwegian peasants to each other, joined in the conversation without obtaining any satisfactory result.

In 1893 Fridjof Nansen was already preparing for the voyage of discovery towards the North Pole which he had carefully contemplated. Skipsey had met him, and had been charmed with his wide and accurate knowledge of our literature. He had been present on the memorable Sunday in February, 1892, when, at the Tyne Theatre, Nansen explained to three thousand persons his plans, and the reasons for the startling conclusions to which he had come, in so simple and lucid a way that every word of that which was really a highly scientific discourse was not only heard, but understood

and treasured by an entranced audience. When the lecturer at length brought his discourse to a conclusion there was a scene of intense enthusiasm, and some management was required to prevent the excitement becoming painfully great. In October of that year the *Fram* was launched, and she sailed on Midsummer Day of the following year.

Amongst other places which Skipsey visited was the yard in which she was being built, and it was a thrilling thing to gaze upon her almost ready to pass away beyond the dense veil which, at that time, hid the far Arctic regions from the habitable world. Skipsey recorded the yacht's voyage in a rhyming letter to Mr. and Mrs. Wood when they returned to Australia, and I extract the following lines from this letter. They show how thoroughly the spirit of the glorious country had entered into his mind, and all Norwegian travellers will appreciate the way in which many of the salient features of the land are alluded to.

When the Muse returns, then a song that burns
Will the harp ring out when the Muse returns!
Then away, away, will Care take wing,
And the heart will dance and the harp will ring.
Then the harp will ring, and the song shall be
Of two young rovers from over the sea,
The one as fair and the other as bold
As ever were sung by a harper old.
And the harp will ring and the strain prolong
How they cheered the heart of a child of song;
Then the harp will ring, and ring with power,
Of a fleet, fleet yacht, and a Nordland tour!

How with the bard they swept the wave
And saw the land of the Viking brave ;
Of the wild weird fjords up which they sailed,
And the pine-clad hills up which they scaled,
And the glory and roar of the waterfall
They viewed and heard, will the harp recall.
And the harp will ring, and ring with might,
Of the great wild birds, and their cries by night ;
Of the deep, deep lakes no plummet can sound ;
Of the vale where the Viking ship was found ;
Of the hope they breathed, of the awe they felt,
When they saw the ship for Nansen built,
And the prayer that welled in the heart for one
Who dared to do what no Viking had done.
O, the harp will ring, and a song that burns
Will the harp ring out when the Muse returns !

In 1885 Skipsey became the editor of several of the first volumes of poetry published under the title of the *Canterbury Poets* by Walter Scott. Those for which he was immediately responsible were Coleridge, Shelley, Blake, Burns and Poe. In each case he wrote a preface for the volume containing a short biography and a critical appreciation of the author. From these Introductions much insight may be obtained into the working of Skipsey's mind. By this time he had read much, including a great number of criticisms, and if you really wished to know what he was as a critic, you had to give him some book as yet unknown to him, and wait until he had carefully read and weighed it. You would then get a clear and unbiassed judgment which, whether you agreed with it or not, you would be compelled

carefully to consider, and would in all probability treasure.

I remember giving him on one occasion "Tom Jones" to read, and when he returned it he said, "That is a marvellous work. It is no ordinary novel or romance. It is a piece of actual history, far more genuine and simple than any other novel I have read."

But it was yet better to hear him discuss some point of literature with a man of trained intellect and knowledge. Perhaps the best instance of this which I can recall was when he met Mr. Edmund Gosse, then the Professor of Poetry at Cambridge, who was much interested in him, and, after a brief conversation, Skipsey became at home with him to a quite unusual extent. There was, if I remember rightly, no real point of difference between them, but Mr. Gosse, with great ability, drew him on until he got into an eloquent and close comparison between Shylock and Marlowe's Barabas in the "Jew of Malta." You might have thought that Skipsey had known them both, and he contrasted their characters and dealt with their actions as though he was speaking of two men with whom he had held intimate communion. There were other points of discussion and conversation which I need not mention, but this unpremeditated discourse has always recurred to me as being of special value.

In the prefatory notices which I have alluded to, although the biographical part is necessarily slight, the criticisms when he is at his best are all his own, and the frequent excursions which he makes into comparisons with other poets have a peculiar interest. I have said that he had by this time learned what other men had

said of most of them, and he had a great power of assimilation. But let me give a specimen of his own words.

Of Shelley he says, after summing up his chief works, "Besides the great poems named, he had during the same wonderful period of his life poured forth a flood of lyric and lesser pieces which had won for him a rank only second to the highest in literature. The great poems named raise him amongst those who occupy the highest rank. In many of his pieces he displayed too strong a predilection for the merely fanciful. But his greatest efforts are beyond those of all other poets since Milton for the magnificent and the sublime. In sublimity he was only surpassed by Milton and Shakespeare." Of course, this doctrine is questionable, but it is Skipsey. He attributes Shelley's fault of a "chromatic brilliancy," "dark with excessive light" (as Leigh Hunt says), "to a plethora of fancy." "Besides this fault, which arises out of a plethora of fancy, there is another which is the offspring of an excessive fondness for knotty mental problems and subjects which belong rather to the sphere of the metaphysician than that of the poet; and in the treatment of which he necessarily discarded the example and precept of Milton, who held that poetry ought to be 'simple, sensuous, and passionate,' or 'impassioned' as Coleridge has it, and both of these defects infect even the very greatest of his productions—the 'Cenci' excepted." Again he says: "Shelley is in verity the king of verse melodists. That title at least must be conceded to him, though in sheer quality of melody and other essentials of lyric song he has been at least equalled, if not excelled, by Shake-

speare. Shelley, to whom the lyric was a channel through which he would pour all his own richest and most precious personal feelings, has indeed left a number of pieces characterised by a beauty of sentiment which is only equalled by two or three of the tiny songlets of Shakespeare, to whom, on the other hand, the lyric was merely the medium through which he would utter the supposed feeling or fancy of the moment of others—but against this must be set an airiness and spontaneity of utterance in all cases unmatched even by Shelley—while the wonderful dramatic propriety of expression displayed in those utterances is in itself a quality of the highest and most supreme value in song—and one, too, by the way, to which Shelley can lay little or no claim. Indeed, in this latter quality I know of no poet who has made the least approach to Shakespeare except Burns, and that poet, too, is also notable for his spontaneity, airiness, and melody; though in the second and last respect he is far below Shelley, as in spontaneity and all other song-essentials he is below Shakespeare, and so on the score of sheer quality alone must be put aside in a consideration as to whom shall be assigned the highest honour in lyric song. But if, on the other hand, fertility of faculty and quantity of lyric product, and that product comprising as it does a series of pictures typical of a vaster number of the various phases of human passion and character than is to be found in any other songsters be considered—and many eminent critics seem to think that this ought on such an occasion to be considered—then it would be a question if Burns had not as just a claim as either Shelley or Shakespeare themselves to the contested laurel. This is a question on

which critics, in all likelihood, will at all times differ, and on which the mass of readers will exercise their own judgment, whatever critics may think ; but of this we may rest assured, whatever the prevailing opinion as to the relative positions as lyrist these bards ought to occupy, that just as the intrinsic value of their songs will remain untouched by such opinion, so just will that intrinsic value cause those songs through all time to be cherished as among the brightest, the purest, the richest, the rarest, and if in size the smallest, in quality the most precious of all the precious jewels that sparkle in the crown of British song."

I do not quote this as the final word on the subject or as a specimen of classic prose writing, but in it and in the quotations which I give from Skipsey's Introductions I wish to show what his views are on certain points not without importance. The style of his prose writing may also be well gathered from such an extract. His fondness for exceedingly long sentences and his love of introducing unexpected comparisons are manifest. I also think it fair to give a full quotation which shows the habit of the sudden introduction of new topics which was always a snare to him. In fact, there scarcely seems a justification for this weighing of the merits of Shelley, Shakespeare, and Burns as lyrist at all. There is little enough space, in thirty-two pages of prefatory notice, for biography and criticism, if the latter be devoted to the works of the author, without making any general excursions into the boundless realms of comparison. It was not mere padding or writing for the sake of writing, for it was thought out and was introduced with deliberate intention. I have

known Skipsey discuss such matters at much length, and with excellent reasons for taking a wrong course, and it was rare indeed that he was persuaded that he had adopted one when he made a great digression.

It was often said in the critical notices of Skipsey's poems which appeared from time to time during his lifetime that he reminded the writers of Blake. I cannot think that this is a sound criticism. Blake is simple and direct, or mystical and remote. Skipsey also is simple and direct, and there are a few poems, amongst those which he published in early middle life, which are tinged with mysticism, but it is a mysticism which I do not think in any way recalls that of Blake. Thus in the edition of "Miscellaneous Lyrics" which he published in 1878 you find "The Seer," which can scarcely perhaps be called mystical. It deals with the reasons why the seer is worthy of man's love; there is certainly no resemblance to Blake in it. I may quote the concluding verse of a somewhat long poem, and it will be at once seen how even in a matter of this kind he is quite simple and direct:—

Ah, to the last his words and deeds are sweeter
Than is the lark's song in the cloud above,
And rare the bard could find befitting metre
To hymn the love we owe this child of love.

But Blake had no great influence upon Skipsey. There has of late years sprung up a Blake cult which I do not think is altogether a genuine growth. The critics, not knowing Skipsey, and finding much natural simplicity in much of his writing, and having just learned

about Blake, made the comparison of the two. But had they known, they would have seen that the great influence upon him was that of Heinrich Heine, as I know and think I shall prove.

Then there are "Omega," "The Inner Conflict," "The Mystic Lyre," "Arachne," "Io Pæan," and those which in the 1886 edition he entitles "Psychic Poems," which are perhaps chiefly interesting because they reveal an astonishing individuality. Where did Skipsey get these thoughts? How full of interest they are when you compare them with the so-called poems which some pitmen publish, and which are chiefly conspicuous for want of all thought! I print some of Skipsey's in the Appendix, as the reader should see the wide range of thought and expression which this self-taught man had. I shall have to show shortly how, in addition to our own poets, he was deeply indebted to the translations of German poets, especially of Heinrich Heine. But after all Skipsey is never a mocking-bird. It has been well said that the mocking-bird has no voice of its own, and Skipsey, in the poems which are peculiarly characteristic of him, has his own voice and no other man's. However, Blake was a great favourite of his, and he carefully read not only his poems but the different works which were written about him. Still, I do not think that his introductory sketch to the volume of Blake's poems in the Canterbury series is satisfactory. He did not follow Blake in his verse. At the outset of the Introduction he gives a wonderful little song which Blake wrote before he was fourteen years old, and then proceeds to give Poe's "Song to Helen" without any reason except that "he was about the same age." He

next quotes Mr. Allingham, who supposed that Blake may have met Emmanuel Swedenborg in the street and walked beside him, and upon this baseless notion he imagines what would have happened if they had met. When he tells of his hero's marriage to Catherine Boucher he is led to speak of the unsuitable women men of genius have married, and Socrates, Dickens, Bulwer Lytton, Sterne, Byron, Burns, Shakespeare, and "even the divine Milton," are in turn brought forth as witnesses. He points out that Blake must have felt himself the herald of a new era in art and song, and the "Poetical Sketches" were put into print in 1783, "when Burns was only in his twenty-fourth year and altogether unknown to fame, Coleridge in his eleventh year, Wordsworth in his thirteenth, and Byron, Shelley, and Keats were as yet unborn."

Although there is a slight yet charming sketch of the man, there is nothing which can be called real constructive criticism of Blake's writings. Skipsey raises the question whether an artist should not rest content with one art, and not endeavour to combine poetry and design, but he does not give any verdict upon it. To discuss it would be merely an exercise of the mind, for, after all was said that could be said upon the subject, the career of a real genius would remain unaffected by the issue.

Now, I cannot but think that with all his admiration for much of Blake's simpler work he never was an utterly congenial poet to Skipsey. When he came to edit Coleridge you at once felt the difference. Here was a man after his own heart, and he perhaps allowed himself to be too much carried away by his worship of the great

poet—"The great bard," as he says of him, "who sung for us and for all time, 'An Ancient Marinere,' 'Christabel,' 'Kubla Khan,' and twenty other of the sweetest, finest, and most marvellous songs that ever flowed from the soul of a bard." Indeed, his criticism becomes something of an extravagant panegyric, not without excuse, for it is not easy to write about Coleridge in ordinary words. Nor was it indiscriminate. He says, for example: "It is remarkable that, with all his genius for poetry and his great powers as a dramatic critic, he was not himself a great dramatist. In fact, his original dramas are neither an addition to his fame nor to the prized treasures of our dramatic literature." He concludes his Preface by saying: "The memory of the author of the 'Ancient Marinere' was such that, when he died, the world may be said to have lost all that could be lost of the greatest poet, if we except Shelley, that England had produced since the days of Milton, and in the domain of pure poetry such a one as has not appeared in the world since."

But, as might be expected from his early acquaintance with him and from the undoubted influence which that acquaintance had upon him, Skipsey comes to his best when Burns is his theme. He devoted two of the *Canterbury* volumes to him, the first a book of poems and the second a book of songs. The chief interest in his Prefaces is that you learn not so much about Burns but what Skipsey thought of his work and the place he took amongst poets, and of the reasons for his exalted position. Far too much has been written about Burns apologetically by those who knew little about him but the facts that at times he drank too much whisky and

that he was never insensible to the charms of women. But these things are stains upon the character of the man freely admitted by all of his admirers and readily accounted for when you are acquainted with the circumstances of his life and rightly forgotten when you come under the sway of the poet.

As for his position, no Southerner, who needs a glossary to understand him, can be allowed to give evidence. If to touch the finest and best chords of the people's heart wherever he is listened to is proof of worth, then, with one exception, Burns stands alone.

And Skipsey shows why. He speaks of the points in which William Shakespeare and Robert Burns stand together, and how they are alike dowered with the deepest human sympathy. And this is perhaps one of the most certain tests in judging of a man's true poetic character. The power to actually sympathise with the world generally, not only with one class of it but with all classes, with all the manifold varieties which go to make up the human race in any country, and the power to express that sympathy in such a way that unobtrusively but certainly it reaches the heart and understanding of every one who listens, is a mighty power. Then Skipsey says: "There is no foolish desire, let me say, to compare Burns with Shakespeare, but in his obvious love for what is noble and sweet in human nature, in his mercy on human frailty, in his sympathy with the oppressed, in his pity for the poor, the helpless, the needy, with the corresponding power of expression, he might be so compared, and when this is said it is meant for the highest compliment that can possibly be paid to any poet, for I am not, as already

intimated, one of those who appear to regard the great dramatist as a sort of 'mere intellectual machine from which when once set agoing anything or everything might have been expected, but as a man whose heart was as brimful of love as his head was of wisdom, and that, moreover, without such love no such wisdom could have been had—that such wisdom, in short, was only the natural and perfect blossom of a tree, the entire sap in whose veins had for its chief element the essence of love itself. In this respect then the dramatist and the lyrist were identical. Neither was Burns deficient in that dramatic power from the aid of which only can the rarest of poetic creations be produced. He composed no dramas so called, but 'The Dying Words,' 'The Twa Dogs,' 'The Jolly Beggars,' and many more of his poems and songs and ballads, display the dramatic faculty in a supreme degree and exhibit in turn the earnestness, the playfulness, the tenderness, the sarcasm, the pathos, or the humour, or what else may be required under the given conditions and at the moment from the interlocutors in his miniature performances, and that whether they be lordly warriors, ragged mendicants, base hypocrites, hoary-headed sages, worldly-wise dames 'wi' wrinkled een,' or thoughtless love-smitten lasses; nay, and this dramatic power holds as good when dogs and sheep are made to speak their minds no less than it is evinced in the words and acts of our bard's women and men."

Again speaking of Burns's gift "to see into the nature of men and things, and the daring and hardihood to say what is thus seen," he says: "It was Burns's glory to be able to do this, and it was his above all

others to have expressed what he thus saw in language which was at once understood by all, and went direct to the heart of the people for whom he sang."

Skipsey also points out that you cannot read a few of the songs or poems as masterpieces and then be content to leave the rest, because you will thus fail to understand the beauty and mystery of his powers. "Nearly all his poems and very many of his songs are notable for some peculiarity of sentiment, observation, or turn in the expression, and which in itself possesses a charm for the mere reader of poetry, while it throws a light into some hidden nook of the popular mind and serves to bring out some trait of the national character."

This is a pregnant saying, and of perfect truth. His language "went direct to the heart of the people for whom he sang." It did and it still does, although it is more than a century since he was laid to rest. The once well known Scotch vocalist, Mr. Kennedy, told me that he and his family had given "Nichts wi' Burns" all over the world, and had never failed to gather large and appreciative audiences. This was perhaps peculiarly the case in Australia, where great barns were cleared, the audiences gathered in some instances from an area of hundreds of miles and staying for one or two nights, keeping the powers of the vocalists very severely taxed. Some of his songs have been set to music by the finest German composers, and they are favourites in Norway and Sweden. In Scotland they are the familiar friends of every one, of all classes alike. I have capped verses of Burns with farm labourers and farmers in the Lowlands, great grazing farmers who measured their farms by miles

and not by acres, professors, members of Parliament, baronets, divines and gillies, and I can testify to the fact that it is no love of jingle, no attraction of mere words, no simple admiration, but a living and life-giving affection, which the Scotsman bears for the verses which go direct to his heart and are his daily food. Burns was to Skipsey a treasury of good things of the best and truest.

It is, perhaps, strange to find that his next choice of a poet whose works he should edit was Edgar Allan Poe. I cannot but think that he habitually overestimated that strange, wild genius. Poe's eccentricities, his many misfortunes, his constant strife under much opposition and provocation, his many sorrows, all appealed with intense force to Skipsey's sympathetic mind, but that Poe should seek consolation in the hour of bereavement in the dangerous nepenthe of strong drink, though explicable and intelligible, was certain to increase the very complaint he took refuge from. Still, it is not a thing to be considered when you are weighing his merits as a poet, and it is difficult to place these nearly so high as Skipsey does. When he says, for example, that "'The Raven' took the world of letters by storm, and produced a sensation throughout America, and wherever the English language was spoken, such as no single poem had ever done before or is likely to do again," I can see no evidence to support the statement. But if the whole of the critical introduction is read I think that we find an eminently sane conception of Poe's true place in poetry, in spite of an attempt to justify the vain saying that "a long poem is a contradiction in terms," and to prove that Shelley,

Tennyson, and Coleridge must rest their claims to consideration as poets upon their short poems.

The editing of these volumes was the last considerable work which Skipsey completed. From time to time he wrote short verses which show in an extraordinary way the influence which Heine had upon him. He had not only studied him carefully in translation, but had heard him sung, and had sought for explanation of many of his less clear passages. He was specially affected by the way in which Heine drew a picture or expressed a thought in two or three verses. This is shown by several of Skipsey's verselets in later years. Many of these have a perfection and charm of their own.

THE BUTTERFLY.

The butterfly from flower to flower
The urchin chased ; and when at last
He caught it in my lady's bower,
He cried Ha ! ha ! and held it fast.
Awhile he laugh'd, but soon he wept
When, looking at the prize he'd caught,
He found he had to ruin swept
The very glory he had sought.

Or the following lines on "The Dewdrop":

Ah ! be not vain, in yon flower bell
As rare a pearl did I appear
As ever grew in ocean shell
To jingle at a Helen's ear.
So was I till a cruel blast
Arose and swept me to the ground ;
When, in the jewel of the past,
Earth but a drop of water found.

But he knew and said that his chief work was done. He wrote continually at a History of Æstheticism, but he had not sufficient knowledge of the many kindred subjects which touched this to really deal with such a task; and I think he found this out for himself. Still, his conversational powers were never abated until long and severe illness laid him on a bed of sickness, and, even then, at intervals when his physical strength was sufficient, it was a rare pleasure to listen to his thoughts on poetry and poets, or, at times, upon the changes which the passing years had made in the life around him, or upon the great questions of foreign and domestic policy which were agitating men and to which he had always given much attention. He took from early days a keen interest in domestic questions and in all matters of foreign policy.

He was indeed a rare conversationist. No one who really knew him at all intimately could fail to see how much greater a man he was than even the best of his works showed him to be. His knowledge of a multitude of matters was extensive, and it was intimately accurate. I may illustrate this by what happened one evening at Bensham Grove. Amongst the persons who had gathered there by chance was a lady from a neighbouring town, who had been reading John Morley's "Voltaire." She asked where the line of Shakespeare which he quoted,

"Roses their sharp spines being gone"

occurred. Several of us thought that we could remember it in Shakespeare, but we failed to find it, and

we sought in glossaries in vain. Mr. Morley happened to be staying with us, and he was appealed to, but he had known when he wrote it twenty years before, though he could not now remember. Just then Skipsey chanced to come into the room, and before he greeted any one, I asked him, "Where does 'Roses their sharp spines being gone' come from?" "Well," he said, "they are the opening lines of Beaumont and Fletcher's 'Two Devoted Kinsmen,' but several good authorities attribute them to Shakespeare, and I think there is much to be said for that view."

I remember one night when a strong argument went on between Mr. Chalmers Morton, who was then Member for Devonport, and Mr. F. R. Benson, the well-known actor, upon the question whether Shakespeare was or was not an admirer of the dog as a companion to man. They were well matched antagonists, and the argument was interesting and amusing. Skipsey came in by accident, and, to my surprise, he at once took Mr. Morton's view that Shakespeare thought but little of the dog as a friend of man; he depicted it as devoid of manners when he mentioned it in a friendly way, and, otherwise, only acknowledged its excellence as an instrument of the chase. Skipsey said that Mr. Flowers, the well-known Stratford man, had written a book upon the subject which was in fact, in his opinion, a conclusive monograph. Mr. Morton afterwards prepared a complete statement, setting out every time the dog is mentioned in Shakespeare's plays, and it in a remarkable way confirmed this view. Skipsey never spoke at random on such matters.

The great interest of Skipsey's conversation lay in its originality, simplicity, and sincerity. The fruits of the long periods devoted to thought in the loneliness of his daily avocation in the mine were poured out in a way which was full of refreshment and instruction, but he did not think of simply speaking for the sake of producing a certain effect; he thought of nothing but the matter in hand.

In our long walks he always broached some subject upon which he cast a rare and often beautiful light. It was marvellously interesting to see how open he was to natural beauty, how in the things which lay close about him, in the wayside flowers, in the march of the clouds, in the colours of the sunset, he took intense delight. He would often choose as a topic some literary theme—a new poem, an essay on some old poet, a question upon Shakespeare's Sonnets, Goethe's Faust as contrasted with Marlowe's Dr. Faustus—the deep instinctiveness of the one and the weird objectiveness of the other, and his expositions were always refreshing and full of light.

The songs of different lands and their local character, and the way in which, without knowing the words, you might tell what part of the world the song came from, was a favourite theme, and many were the unexpected illustrations which he adduced. A Norwegian captain, a friend of mine, who had spent much time in the islands of the Greek Archipelago, sang many of the local songs to him, and there could be no doubt as to their place of origin. He had an intense love for music but a perfect passion for song, and he fully appreciated the poetic richness of the German "Volks-

lieder." It was a pleasure to watch him as he listened to old English ballads, to Burns' songs, to Stanford's setting of "Patrick Sarsfield," "The Arbutus Tree," or the "Little Red Lark." No doubt they spoke more directly to him, but he was much devoted to Schubert and Schumann, and took much delight in Goethe's songs, as well as those of the German people. I have never known any one who got more excellent enjoyment out of song than Skipsey. Unfortunately it is impossible to give an idea in words of what such things really were. Those who have seen him when he was deeply moved can imagine how rarely it was possible to pass an hour with him without going away feeling the richer for the occasion.

He was an admirer of Robert Browning's poetry, but cared much the most for "Pippa Passes," and especially the wild, passionate scene between Ottima and Sebald. Few of the longer poems he read at all, and the same is true of Tennyson's poetry.

That there was a peculiar charm about his conversation and about the man himself is shown by the high estimate formed of him by men of widely different pursuits, but who, in common, highly valued all that shows a man to be a true thinker of power and independence.

I take the following from the "Memorials of Edward Burne Jones," by Lady Burne Jones. She writes: "This summer (1880) brought us a brief friendship, and then took away the friend it gave—Mr. Thomas Dixon, of Sunderland, to whom Ruskin wrote the letters afterwards published as 'Time and Tide by Wear and Tyne.' Mr. Dixon had already written to Edward, but he first came to the Grange one day early in June, when



THOMAS DIXON



he lunched with us. We felt the delicacy of his nature, and liked him at once ; and the liking was quickened when we found that his great pleasure was not to introduce himself but to bring his chief friend and hero, Joseph Skipsey, up from Newcastle to London for a few days in order to make him known to some of the men whose work he specially honoured, and who he thought would recognise Skipsey's gifts. What he said of his friend is well known : that he had worked in a coal-pit from the time when he was seven years old, but that a ray of the divine light and genius had lit up even that black world for him, and by this time he was a man to be worshipped by at least one other—who was telling us the story.

“A few days after this Mr. Dixon dined with us to meet Morris, and my diary says it was ‘A good evening,’ but details are lost. The Sunday following is clearer in memory. It was a beautiful summer day, and the two friends came to the Grange together, and we all walked and talked together in the garden before supper. Skipsey was a noble-looking man, with extremely gentle and courteous manners. Edward talked much with him, and was much struck with his wide knowledge of English literature and his poetic vision, but felt that the circumstances of his life had left him at a disadvantage in the art of writing poetry, for which nothing could make up. He felt also that one so sensitive in nature must see this clearly and must carry about with him the pain of knowing that all he did could only be judged after allowance made. Thinking of this Edward wrote sadly yet hopefully : ‘Of course his poems are not much to us ; only one measures by relation, and sometimes the little that a man does who has had no

chance whatever seems greater than the accomplished work of luckier men—on the widow's mite system of arithmetic, which is a lovely one.'

"Twice again the friends lunched with us during the week they remained in London, and the last time was farewell for this world in Mr. Dixon, who went back to Sunderland, took to his bed, and in little more than a fortnight sank and died of exhaustion following on the excitement and exultation of carrying out his generous plan.

"The thought of Skipsey working in a dark mine whilst he himself painted pictures by daylight was intolerable to Edward, who was not comforted until things were altered and the poet and his wife had obtained the post of caretakers of Shakespeare's house at Stratford-on-Avon."

Perhaps one of his closest friendships was that with Thomas Dixon, who was one of the most beautiful characters I have known. He was emphatically a gentleman, a man of refined taste, of much thought, and careful reading. He had a remarkably wide acquaintance, corresponding with Professor Max Muller, Charles Kingsley, F. D. Maurice, John Stewart Mill, Thomas Carlisle, and many others, including a considerable number of leading artists. It is an interesting fact that Professor Max Muller sent him the proofs of his lectures on "The Science of Language" for his perusal and suggestions. He was of great value to Sunderland in bringing the committee of its Art Gallery into immediate touch with many artists, and there are few men who have been more widely consulted by young people as to their courses of study in either literature or

art. He was a man of few needs, and generous exceedingly. His friends gave him what they produced. Books came to him from innumerable quarters, and yet his library was always a small one. So soon as he had mastered a book and stored it away in his mind he felt it a duty to hand it to others, and thus he became a missionary of knowledge. How many of us have stores of books on our library shelves which are seldom referred to, and which, while they stand upon the shelves, are worthless, only becoming of use when they are actually used? Dixon held that it was wastry to keep a book which was not being read or referred to. I remember once, when he spent a day or two with me when George Macdonald was also visiting me, and the conversation turned upon Blake's "Book of Job" with full illustrations. This happened to be unknown to George Macdonald, but Dixon had had a copy of it presented to him by John Linnell, the great artist, and, so soon as he returned home, he sent it as a gift to George Macdonald, who was uneasy at receiving so costly and unique a book as a present from one to whom its special value must be a matter of considerable importance. He wrote to Dixon gratefully for the kindness of his thought, but told him he would study the book carefully and then return it to him. This was said as gently and delicately as he could phrase it. I wish I had kept a copy of Dixon's wise, firm, and beautiful reply of persistence, which showed him to have the highest qualities of the true man. He was always the same gentle being—genuine, generous beyond belief. And he was a rare friend to Skipsey, being himself widely and well known, partly, no doubt, owing to the fact of the twenty-five

letters on "Time and Tide by Weare and Tyne"—letters to a working man of Sunderland on the "Laws of Work" by John Ruskin. He introduced Joseph Skipsey to many brilliant circles of thoughtful men, to whom the best thought of the time owed much.

Perhaps I may be allowed to say here what as I write is very present with me now that all of these men are passed away, how the memory of the old days when we met together in close communion is one of my most cherished possessions. Three men of humble origin, only one of whom, by virtue of being a Scotsman, was entitled to be called educated in the ordinary sense, a novelist, a corkcutter, and a pitman, but whose conversation, whose habitual thought were quiet, simple, refined, always noble, penetrating and elevating. You never parted from any one of them without true regret, never met them without rejoicing. Such men are not only worthy to stand before kings, they are above all worldly titles or possessions; they are the salt of the earth.

Thomas Dixon died on July 11, 1880, and Dante Rossetti wrote that he never met with one of equal worth in his own single-minded devotion to the intellectual good of others.

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI TO HIS SISTER.

"16th *July*, 1880.

"I think I told you of a visit I had a few weeks ago from Thomas Dixon, of Sunderland (whom you must have long heard of, since Newcastle days with Scotus), and Joseph Skipsey, the Northern Collier Poet, a man of real genius. The other day I was shocked to get a

letter from Skipsey announcing poor Dixon's death. Having overdone exertion in London, he succumbed to chronic asthma on his return. He was a worthy man; indeed, I never knew of any one individual in any walk of life—even a much higher one than his—who was so entirely devoted to promoting intellectual good among those within his reach."

TO HIS MOTHER.

"Again," he says, "I hear from Scotus in much sorrow at poor Dixon's death."

Max Muller said: "You know that Thomas Dixon was not a learned man, but I can assure you that his letters, in spite of occasional mistakes in spelling, showed a clearer insight into the true objects of all my writings and conveyed to me more useful criticisms than many a review in our best weekly, monthly, or quarterly journals. How he found time to do all that he did, and to read all that he read, and to think out all that he thought out for himself, is still a riddle to me. Nothing gives me stronger faith in the intellectual vigour and moral strength of the English people than that such a man as Thomas Dixon could have lived and passed away almost unknown except to his friends and fellow-citizens. We must not judge England by its so-called head or capital city, but by its backbone that runs through the provinces, and by its noble heart that beats so strongly in the breasts of such men as Thomas Dixon—a provincial corkcutter, if you like, but a truer, nobler man than many a duke or a marquis."

This was true indeed of both the friends. They had alike the power of vision which neither position nor education nor money can possibly give.

Perhaps you saw most clearly Skipsey's unusual development and most intimately the man he really was when you heard him read or recite. It was not at all like the reading or recitation of other men. In the first place, he did not often do it, and that which he read or said was carefully selected. He used often to repeat to me his own poems before they were written out, but the ballad on the Hartley Pit accident we have frequently persuaded him to repeat to small gatherings of friends, and no one who heard him repeat that or read Clarence Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen" or "Kathleen Ny-houla-han" will ever forget it. He waited quietly until he felt the spirit of that which he was about to do come upon him. Then he was as one possessed, everything but the poem was forgotten, but that he made live, or perhaps I should more truly say that he incarnated it; he actually became the poem himself. His features changed with every expression of the verse, his hands, nay, even his fingers, expressed the meaning of the words, and that meaning thoroughly revealed itself. It was far beyond what you had thought of, but it stood out clear for you ever afterwards. When, on rare occasions, he recited the "Hartley Pit Calamity" to a large audience, the emotion it awakened was almost painful to witness. I think I have never known a reader, reciter, or actor who could be compared with him for his power over words. They indeed became living things; they lived in him.

Of course he knew our Border ballads intimately, and

held them at their true high worth. Modern ballads rarely touched him, though many modern songs did. I read him one night Rudyard Kipling's "East is East and West is West," and he was much moved by it. "That is the best ballad written since the old times," was his remark.

Occasionally he went to the theatre, and intensely enjoyed a really great drama. At times he lectured upon such subjects as "The Poet as Seer," and he was then well worth listening to.

Looking back at him now that four years have passed since he left us, and taking him all in all, I think that I have never known a greater man. And yet I can well understand that that verdict would seem strange to many persons who knew him less intimately. I do not speak only of what he did, but far more of what he was. For more than forty years we were intimate friends, and I knew him more closely than most men. It may be to some extent I judge him by the facts of his life. It is difficult to remove them from the mind, but as a poet I do not think I have ever exaggerated him. He is a poet, a true poet, but not a great one, though with him the poetic faculty is real, not a common thing to find. But it is as a man of thought, of intellectual power, of quite marvellous insight, of strong and wide sympathy, that he dwells in my mind. He had his failings and shortcomings. He was too serious. He scarcely possessed humour. All his stories were of actual life, and generally of serious episodes in his own life. I have not much further to say as to that life. I think that the last few years were perhaps the happiest in that the devotion of his children and the assistance which he

received from the small Government pension which Mr. Gladstone gave him satisfied his few wants, and he and his wife lived quietly and happily with one or other of his sons or, until they married, with both of them.

In August, 1902, Mrs. Skipsey passed away. This was a serious blow from which he really never recovered. Within a few months he was attacked by a serious illness, and it soon became evident that it was to be one from which he would not recover. He used to read the newspapers a little, and took great interest in the political questions which from time to time were brought forward, but specially in the attempted revival of Protection. This, as I have already explained, he was strongly opposed to. He was also a great Peace man, and from the beginning intensely averse to the war in the Transvaal. He frequently talked for a short time upon subjects relating to the possibility of a life beyond. He explained how he had abandoned many views which he had held for a time, as the light which he thought thrown upon them rendered them incredible, and that many had been laid aside for what to him were more important or more absorbing. He had found that, at times, those who stood forth as the apostles of a faith were wrong, though they were not wilful deceivers, but themselves deceived. But those of us who had the privilege of sitting frequently by his bedside know that, whilst he was untroubled by dogmas and doctrines which men quarrel greatly about but do not understand, he held firmly to the simple faith which was reduced by Christ Himself into the love of God and the love of man. He passed away in September, 1903, a little more than twelve months after his great bereavement.

APPENDIX

I HAVE added this Appendix, which contains certain poems which I have not mentioned particularly before, because I wish it to be seen by every one who is interested in the matter that Skipsey had a very great variety of compositions. I think that no one will read through the poems I give without being satisfied that he is not in any ordinary sense a mere rhymester.

The following are from what he calls *Psychic Poems*, and are contained in the edition of his "*Carols from the Coal-fields*," published in 1886.

THE RIDDLE READ.

I thank my God I ever lived to see the blessed day,
When the Spirit's immortality to me is rendered clear;
Not by a logic might be made some other tune to play,
But by a flash of inner light too keen for doubt to bear.

Long, long can death, be death indeed? I asked 'mid doubts
and fears;

Long vainly groped in darkness for the jewels I had lost;
Long listened for an answer to the quest expressed in tears,
And only found what to the heart a bitterer struggle cost.

Oft in the visions of the night, I saw their golden locks;
I kiss'd their eyes as violets sweet when March with bois-
terous breath,

The lordly oak itself—nay more, the lordly steeple rocks.
And ever as the morn arose I found them fast in death.

Then said I—if the "be all" and the "end all" of this strife,
Be but to furnish coronals the temples to adorn
Of Life's imperious Enemy, then, death, and not for life,
Should be the boon solicited whene'er a babe is born.

Far better man had never been, if in a circle he
Must travel till the little hour of mortal life is run,
To find when Life's dark riddle's read he then must cease
to be,
And the end of all his trouble is the end where he begun.

To labour in a night on which the sun will never rise—
 To sweat and groan without a hope shall end the bitter
 curse,
 Save in a dissolution which shall only close our eyes
 On all we love and cherish—all?—what destiny were
 worse?

Nor worse were e'en the lot of those the Danaides of yore,
 Condemn'd the hole-fill'd tanks to fill from which the waters
 gushed
 As fast as they the fluid in poured or could the fluid in
 pour,
 And left them only for their pains a heart by anguish
 crush'd.

Not worse to be like Ixion doom'd on a wheel to spin,
 Transfix'd on which the victim sad arrived at every
 round,
 Just where he did the weary, dizzy, dreary round begin,
 Which he—the sore confounded—served the deeper to
 confound.

Not worse to be like Sisypheus, destined up a high hill,
 With many an effort, many a pang, still to uproll a rock,
 Which when the goal was all but won, despite an iron
 will,
 Re-bounded in a way that made his labours vast, a mock.

Not worse to be like these, for these, amid their night of
 pain,
 Had intervals of hope that would the darkest hour
 illumine;
 But what avails to charm the soul who loves and toils—
 and then
 Learns not a vestige of his ME can pass beyond the
 tomb?

In vain to point the present—what can the present yield,
 Except what proves a mock, and still the heart with sorrow
 fills?
 And without the charm a Future Life affords, without a
 shield
 The soul is left to battle with the worst of human ills.

In vain to point the past, in vain, will not its sheen arise
Upon the mind about to be in death's dark cradle rock'd,
To keener make the thought that when the vital sparklet
flies,
Lock'd lies the spirit in the bonds in which the sense is
lock'd?

To die and be no more is more than we can think, with-
out
An effort such as rends the heart or petrifies the man;
And when the soul has once began to tread the plain of
Doubt,
The valley of Despair is reached before we halt, or can.

Thus felt I till the truth was found by patient labour
sought,
—By labour and a spirit framed to brook the world's
harsh scorn;
When gilded by its sheen a soul was mine with rapture
fraught,
And may be yours who seek aright the truths I sought to
learn.

THE SOUL'S HEREAFTER.

Dies not the soul when dust to dust is given;
Even as we are in earth-life are we still,
Save from the worn-out garment rent and riven,
That may have proved a fetter to the will.

Not unto demons void of good converted,
Not unto angels void of error—no;
But human-spirited and human-hearted,
We on our way with pain or pleasure go.

Not reft of feeling—nay, with feelings keener
To others' woes, more keen to others' joys;
With bosoms purer and with minds serener—
Though human still, more humane we and wise.

Not more to be despised, nor venerated,
For aught from change of state acquired or caught,
But at our inner value estimated,
Shall we be shunned or courted as we ought.

Not to their fabled hell, nor fabled heaven,
 By the good Father's will are we consigned,
 But to a sphere of human action—even,
 To one adapted to each frame and mind.

Not one sweet feeling passeth unrewarded,
 Not one black deed can go unpunished—not—
 Not one swift thought can vanish unrecorded
 And give no colour to our future lot.

Not words but thoughts, and not on faith but actions,
 And on whatever gives our acts their hue,
 The heart's allurements, and the mind's distractions—
 Is based the verdict we shall prize or rue.

Yes, such the future that awaits the spirit;
 Then let us pause and think while pause we can,
 How best we may the meed eternal merit,
 That shall be to the weal eterne of man.

THE INNER CONFLICT.

Thrice "Ið Pæan!" let me cry,
 And bless the hour that I was born;
 And born thro' love in vain to sigh—
 To cheer my longing heart a morn
 Has risen in my ebon sky,
 Such as did ne'er my sky adorn;
 And now with shout triumphant, lo!
 A victor on my way I go.

A tenant of some curse-girt sphere
 Long seemed I—even so—and Pain
 Still by a destiny severe,
 Had power my spirit to enchain,
 Or to impel his venom'd spear
 Up to the hilt in heart and brain;
 And this he did—but this once done,
 The measure of his power was run—

Yea, having brooked the worst, I felt
 The power within, with steadfast gaze,
 To scan the blows upon me dealt,—
 Life's issues to their cause to trace;

And whilst I looked, the fogs did melt
That swathed my ken—and face to face
I stood with Fate's own self and viewed
The secret of the lash I'd rued.

Illumined by an inner light,¹
My past a pictured scroll became,
In which my sorrow, my delight,
My hope, my fear, my pride, my shame,
Assumed a shape and colour quite
Beyond the power of speech to name—
A chronicle mysterious, man
Engrossed by self might never scan.

Yet gazing on that mystic scroll,
Enough of its contents was read,
To teach my desolated soul,
Not all in vain she'd pined and bled
Beneath the lash, the dire control
Of passions fierce, by beauty fed;—
Nor yet in vain her longings—if
She read aright this hieroglyph.

This learned I from that scroll, and learned
The way by which to rend the chain
Had kept my soul in self inured:
Unhappy self that would obtain,
Whatever won is ever mourn'd,
Whose blessings e'er as bans remain—
Ah, would that men would reck this reed,
So would their hearts less often bleed.

With feelings sharpened—eye and ear—
For others weal I then did learn
To shed the sympathetic tear,
To wile the frown from temples stern;
To do the thing desired to cheer,
To speak the word required to warn
And in return a boon did find,
In all appeals to heart and mind.

Ay, with the All-enwoven—both
The outer and the inner world
Did I survey—e'en in the froth
By Life's imperious surges hurled

In its unutterable wroth,
 As worthy only to be furl'd
 In limbo's bosom—on Time's sands,
 A sheen that seen the soul expands.

That glory in the grass, as sung,
 By deep-souled bard, and in the flower
 A glamour o'er my spirit flung,
 And strove—nor vainly—to re-dower
 Her with that bliss from which we sprung,
 When in creation's natal hour
 God said, "Let there be Light!"—and up
 She leapt enraptured with Life's cup.

Then "Iö Pæan!" let me cry,
 And bless the hour that I was born,
 And born thro' Love to languish—ay,
 To curse that natal hour—a morn
 Has risen in my spirit's sky,
 Such as did ne'er that sky adorn:
 And now with shout triumphant, lo!
 A victor on my way I go.

The following do not belong to any named set of poems:—

THE LILY OF THE VALLEY.

To E. W.

This Lily of the Valley smells
 Too sweet for human speech to say;
 And passing beautiful those bells
 That hide their faces from the day.

It is a gem, tho' small, too rare
 For mortal hand to pluck, and twine
 With any save an angel's hair;
 And that is why 'tis placed in thine.

A LULLABY.

Thro' the dark and dreary night,
 Golden slumbers kiss thine eyes;
 Sleep, and in the early light
 With a golden smile arise
Sleep, my baby, do not cry,
—Lulla, lulla, lullaby.

Trouble art thou! baby nay;
 Brightest star in all my sky,
 Since was turned to night my day,
 And thy father—Do not cry!
Sleep, my baby, do not cry,
—Lulla, lulla, lullaby.

The round red moon, she's sinking low,
 The wind up-tears the very roof;—
 The moon may sink, the wind may blow,
 For thee, my child, I'm tempest proof.
Sleep, my baby, do not cry,
—Lulla, lulla, lullaby.

ALAS!

Alas! the woe the high of heart,
 Seem pre-ordained to undergo,
 While proud ambition hides the smart,
 And smiles delude the world below.

Their anguish, like a Samson blind,
 Gropes on in darkness, till at length
 It grasps the pillars of the mind,
 And dies a victim to its strength.

THE PROUD ONE'S DOOM.

"Queen Pearl's own equal—nay,
 A fairer far am I," May Dewdrop said,
 As Sol at break of day
 Did kiss the sparkler on her grass-blade bed.

"None may my charms resist!"
 "None," Sol still kissing answered, when alas!
 The proud one turned to mist,
 And with her pride did into Lethe pass.

THE HELL BROTH.

The devil and the devil's brood
 Around a boiling cauldron hung,
 While in a nook in merry mood
 Grim Death a dainty ditty sung;
 For guided by a baleful star
 The devil himself had caused to beam,
 Lo, myriads hurried from afar
 To reap the fruit of a darksome dream:

On, on they came with cheek a-flame
And lips that quivered as they sought
In tones subdued the demon brood,
For but a drop of the magic pot.
—Anon around was the hell-broth spun,
And a measure brimmed to old and young,
The while delighted with the fun,
Grim Death a merry ditty sung.

That potion quaff in his conceit,
Behold the dwarf a giant tread,
At least a hundred thousand feet
Above his worthier neighbour's head ;
Despising still or lord or serf,
About the land he strutting goes,
'Till bang against a brother dwarf,
The merry fellow runs his nose :
Thus many a one—loon, fop, and clown—
A lesson to their sorrow got,
And yet aloud they pray the brood
For deeper draughts of the magic pot.
—Anon around was the hell-broth spun,
And a measure drained by old and young,
The while delighted with the fun,
Grim Death a merry ditty sung.

New double-drugg'd the rout about
A soul-consuming furnace bore,
And what they took to put it out,
But only made it burn the more :
It burnt in heart, it burnt in brain,
And from its fumes arose a sprite,
One, whom her favours to obtain
They chased by day, they chased by night ;
And still as they deemed her their prey,
Away, away with a leer she shot,
'Mid cries right loud to the demon brood,
For deeper draughts of the magic pot.
—Again around was the hell-broth spun,
And a measure drained by old and young,
The while delighted with the fun,
Grim Death a merry ditty sung.

So la, ta, la !—that fiery draught
Now led them one and all a dance :
Lo, ere the drug was wholly quaff,
Each threw on each a lurid glance ;

And from that glance a wasp took wing,
From busy tongue to ear it flew,
And ever around it bore a sting
The devil himself had cause to rue:
It stung them black, it stung them blue,
And with each sting the louder got,
Their cries right loud to the demon brood,
For deeper draughts of the magic pot.
—Again around was the hell-broth spun,
And a measure drained by old and young,
The while delighted with the fun,
Grim Death a merrier ditty sung.

That horrid draught being duly quafft,
A cry o'er plain and mountain rolled,
At which the strong the weaker took,
And bartered body and soul for gold:
And of the gold thus gotten, they
At once a gloomy castle built,
Whose dome might from the eye of day
Forever hide their horrid guilt:
Tombed in their victims' blood-price thus,
Long revelled they and faltered not
To cry aloud to the demon brood,
For deeper draughts of the magic pot.
—But around no more was the hell-broth spun;
Awe-struck the fiends in the pot had sprung,
The while surfeited with the fun,
Death cursed the merry lay he'd sung.

THE REIGN OF GOLD.

It sounded in castle and palace,
It sounded in cottage and shed,
It sped over mountains and valleys,
And withered the earth as it sped;
Like a blast in its fell consummation
Of all that we holy should hold,
Thrilled, thrilled thro' the nerves of the nation,
A cry for the reign of King Gold.

Upstarted the chiefs of the city,
And sending it back with a ring,
To the air of a popular ditty,
Erected a throne to the king;

'Twas based upon fiendish persuasions,
Cemented by crimes manifold:
Embellished by specious ovations,
That dazzled the foes of King Gold.

The prey of unruly emotion,
The miner and diver go forth,
And the depths of the earth and the ocean
Are shorn of their lustre and worth;
The mountain is riven asunder,
The days of the valley are told;
And sinew and glory, and grandeur,
Are sapped for a smile of King Gold.

Beguiled of their native demeanour,
The high rush with heirlooms and bays;
The poor with what gold cannot weigh, nor
The skill of the pedant appraise;
The soldier he spurs with his duty,
And lo! by the frenzy made bold,
The damsel she glides with her beauty,
To garnish the brow of King Gold.

Accustomed to traffic forbidden
By honour—by heaven—each hour,
The purest, by conscience unchidden,
Laugh, laugh at the noble and pure;
And Chastity, rein'd in a halter,
Is led to the temple and sold,—
Devotion herself, at the altar,
Yields homage alone to King Gold.

Affection, on whose honey blossom,
The child of affliction still fed—
Affection is plucked from the bosom,
And malice implanted instead;
And dark grow the brows of the tender,
And colder the hearts of the cold:—
Love, pity, and justice surrender
Their charge to the hounds of King Gold.

See, see, from the sear'd earth ascending,
A cloud o'er the welkin expands;
See, see, 'mid the dense vapour bending,
Pale women with uplifted hands;

Smokes thus to the bridegroom of Circe,
The dear blood of hundreds untold;
Invokes thus the angel of mercy
A curse on the reign of King Gold.

It sounded in castle and palace
It sounded in cottage and shed,
It sped over mountains and valleys,
And withered the earth as it sped;
Like a blast in its fell consummation
Of all that we holy should hold,
Thrilled, thrilled thro' the nerves of the nation;
"Cling! clang! for the reign of King Gold."

THE SEER.

Would I could waken numbers, brighter, sweeter,
Than is the lark's song in the cloud above,
Then would I tell you in befitting metre,
How much the Seer is worthy of your love.

Shy, sensitive is he, and far from equal
Unto the battle of material life,
He strives unheeded and, too oft the sequel,
Unheeded falleth in the bitter strife.

Averse to falsehood and pretences hollow,
Averse to slander, cruelty, and wrong,
He scorns the gilded car of pomp to follow,
And underneath is trampled by the throng.

Too nobly strung of self to brook the mention—
Too sweetly strung to give another pain—
Too finely strung for pleasure in contention,
He seeks within the meed he would obtain.

Unlike the crowd who never dare look inward,
Lest they a hideous spectre there should meet,
Would point to secret longings prompting sinward,
He looks within and finds a solace sweet.

Ay, in a conscience pure he sees a charmer—
A harper from whose harp such tones are hurl'd,
They act as mighty spells, as tested armour,
To shield him from the malice of the world.

"Go on, brave heart," he hears an anthem chanted,
The distant echoes of that harp's weird tones;
"Go on—to thee a richer dower is granted
Than that which gilds a hundred monarchs' thrones.

"Thou may'st be thrust aside and scorned and taunted
As being a lunatic, a knave or fool,
Thou hast within thy inner being planted
A power that yet shall put the world to school.

"Thou may'st be destined here to tribulation;
Thy every pang shall prove a key, by which
Thou shalt unlock some safe of the Creation
And with its precious stores thy mind enrich.

"Illumined by that sun forever burning,
Deep in the centre of the inner spheres,
Thou shalt be gifted with the gift of learning
What lieth hidden from thy mortal peers.

"In every planet in the midnight heaven—
In every hue doth in the rainbow blend,
Shalt thou perceive a lore and meaning, given
To very few on earth to comprehend.

"The very flower upon the meadow blowing—
The very weed down trampled on the road,
Shall be to thee a priceless casquet, glowing
With glories hinting of the light of God.

"In every breezelet—nay, in the commotion
Of raging winds—in every streamlet clear—
Nay, in the roaring of the mighty ocean,
Shalt thou hear sounds will gladden thee to hear.

"Thus shalt thou in the Universe external,
The Universe internal read, and so
Possess what shall be to the weal eternal
Of earth's benighted 'habitants to know.

"The buried eons of the Past—their history,
Still glows in characters that thou shalt read;
And from the future thou shalt pluck its mystery,
And point the goal to where the moments lead.

"Whatever thrills the heart with feelings precious,
Whatever tends to cast the spirit down,
The deed delightful, or the hint pernicious,
Shall claim withal in turn thy smile or frown.

"Remind shalt thou the soul aweary, weary
Even with the battle thou thyself hast fought,
How thro' deep failure and thro' toil uncheery,
Must every triumph worth his care be wrought.

"Nay even at the hest of a volition
Still, still to highest purposes attuned,
Shalt thou go forth a monarch, and ambition
And evils many with thy glance confound.

"'Woe,' black-browed guilt shall cry; and 'woe' and vanish
Despair and desolation, sisters sad;
And for the hydra-brood thou thus shalt banish,
Celestial Love shall make the spirit glad.

"Uplifting them by slow yet sure gradations,
From spheres inferne into the spheres superne,
Shalt thou thus prove a boon unto the nations,
And in return a boon divine shalt earn.

"If not in monuments of brass or marble,
Deep in men's spirits shall thy glory glow;
And little ones shall of the wonders warble
Accomplished by the wise man long ago.

"All this and more than this shall be thy guerdon,—
The sense of having acted right!"—So says
The happy echo of that harp's sweet burden
A certain Seraph in his bosom plays.

And this enableth the true seer ever
To triumph tho' he falleth, and to pray
That theirs like his may be a portion never,
Who plot and plan to take his life away.

Ah, to the last his words and deeds are sweeter
Than is the lark's song in the cloud above,
And rare the bard could find befitting metre,
To hymn the love we owe this child of Love!

THE ELF.

If thou wilt persist to ponder
On the phantom fled,
Can there be a moment's wonder
Thou art ill bested?

She who, robed in green so meetly,
Blink'd on thee and smiled,
Fleetly came and went as fleetly—
Was no mortal child.

She who sung to thee so sweetly,
And to airs so wild,
Featly danced, still danced so featly—
Was no mortal child.

Dream not on her tresses yellow;
Elf yet only can
Be to elf a fitting fellow,
Not to mortal man!

DAFFODIL AND DAISY

Adorned in many a gem this morn,
A daffodil without a peer,
I reared my head, and treat with scorn
A one-pearl-gifted daisy near.

That very hour, lo! wind-a-rock'd
Was I left gemless evermore;
Nay, made to envy what I'd mock'd,
That one sweet pearl the daisy wore.

THE MOTH.

To-night a gilded moth took wing,
And round-a-round yon wax-light flew ;
And, while his flight did her enring,
He nearer to the dazzler drew.

" So fair art thou," he cried, " to view,
I'd die upon thy lips to feed ;"
And so must snatch a kiss and rue—
Ah, he was murder'd for the deed !

LOTTY HAY.

As I came down from Earsdon Town,
Upon an Easter day,
Whom did I meet but she, the sweet,
The blue-eyed Lotty Hay.

A crimson blush her cheek did flush,
Nor sin did that betray ;
The pearl is sure a jewel pure,
And so is Lotty Hay.

All evil flees her heart, yet she's
To Slander oft a prey,
And words of ill do nearly kill
The lowly Lotty Hay.

Some deem her proud ; in speech aloud
Some other yet will say
She's cold or fierce, and all to pierce
The heart of Lotty Hay.

Proud ?—She's not proud : to-day I viewed
A lammie near her stray,
And that wee thing kind blinks did bring
From soft-eyed Lotty Hay.

Fierce ?—She's not fierce ; a fly did pierce—
Once pierce her wee hand, nay
And made her cry, yet that bad fly
Was spared by Lotty Hay.

Not proud nor bold, not fierce nor cold,
 But meek, kind, mild alway—
 A soul of light did meet my sight
 As I pass'd Lotty Hay.

Upon her way so went the may,
 And light as any fay,
 Or thistle-down by breezes blown,
 Went wee, wee Lotty Hay.

In cotton gown she tript to town,
 And not a lady gay
 In satin drest could be more blest
 Than little Lotty Hay.

Looking lately through the fourth volume of my Visitors' Book, I came, with the date March, 1894, on the following, which is apparently a portion of a letter to me from Skipsey:—

"I believe I promised you a copy of the revised 'Bugle Horn,' and will give it. Of all the lyrics I have penned none are dearer to me than those I wrote during our visit to Grasmere, 1886, and this I believe to be one of the best of them."

THE BUGLE HORN.

O, the bugle horn I heard last night;
 Its wild tone set the echoes flying,
 And night-long in my soul, Delight
 Danced, danced, her gift for dancing trying;

No wilder tone had echo known,
 Since first upon the height she haunted;
 She cried to fly, yet fled to cry,
 What awed, when heard, and yet enchanted!

A little later I came upon the following poem, which seems to me to be of special interest, because it is peculiarly illustrative of a certain important part of pit life. The lamp is dying out, but rather than attempt to trim it, which might be dangerous, the man will work his way out of the pit in the dark.

THE MINER AND HIS LAMP.

What ails the lamp? It burns so dim;
Yes, yes, its cup is dry;
But I've no time to heed its whim
If oil it lacks—not I!

See, see, it pouts, like all who pout,
The more its mood we mark—
Well, well, if so then—out—flick out!
Than this I'll face the dark.



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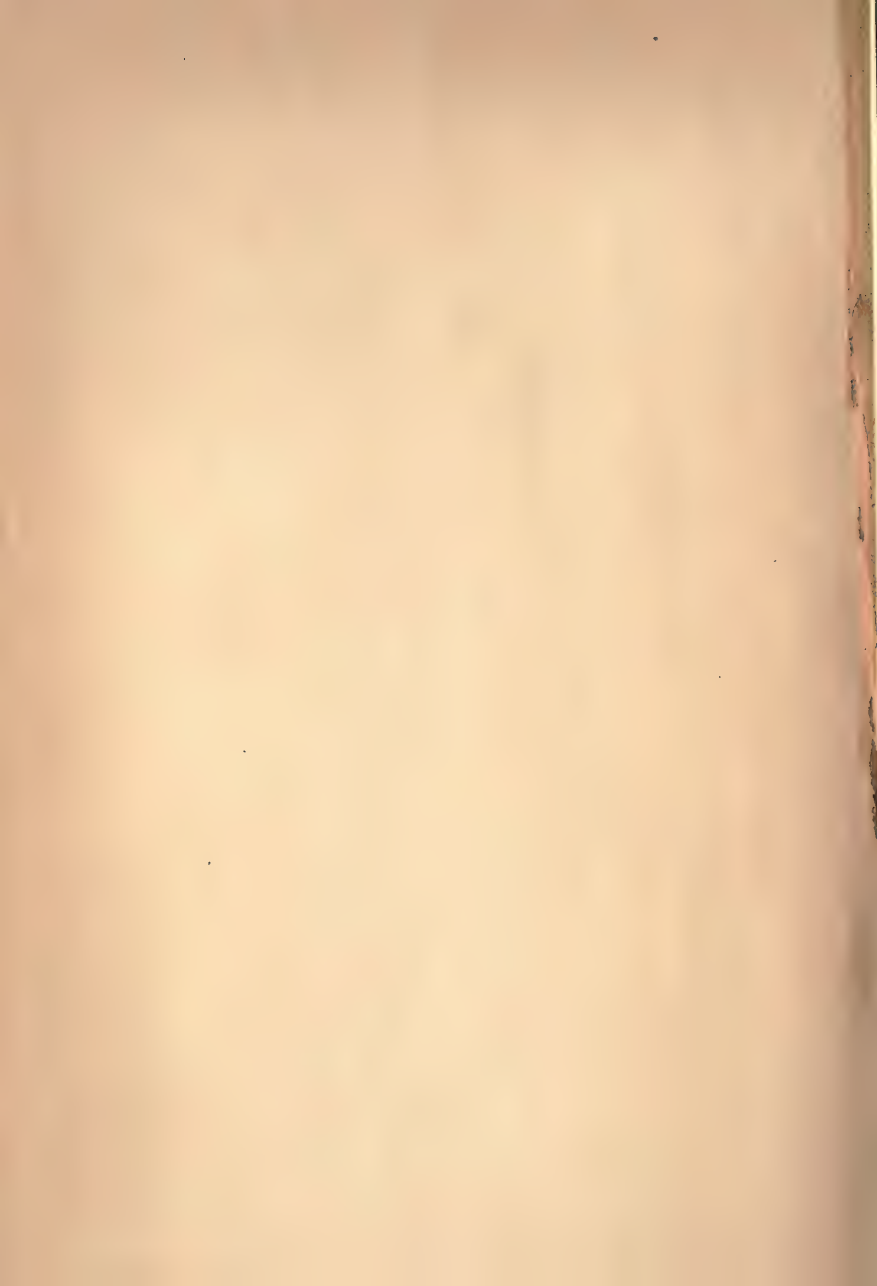
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